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Hitler's battalions. The living dead of the Wehrmacht

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"The living Dead"

ZWehrmacht

Introduction

I twist a small booklet in my hands. Printed on modest paper. A couple of military photographs and a few paragraphs of text. Return address: 10243 Berlin, Franz-Mehringplatz 1. This address is the location of the "Workers' Association of the former 999s".

In history, they have remained under the faceless numbers 999th and 500th. The former gather in Berlin, the latter in Bremen, where in October 1990, 45 years after the end of World War II, the United Union of Victims of Nazi Military Justice was created. It would seem that these two numbers have the same fate, but still they do not like each other.

friend. During the World War, all of them ended up in "test units" or, in Russian, were penalized.

Few people know that the practice of penal battalions was borrowed by I.V. Stalin in Germany. The topic of penal battalions constantly disturbed our society. At first there were Vysotsky's songs, during the years of perestroika - the film "Gu-ha". A new surge of interest occurred in November 2004, when the series "Penal Battalion" was broadcast on Russian television, which immediately took the highest positions in the ratings. The creators of the multi-part film, showing that the USSR "won with meat" in World War II, caused heated discussions, and not only among movie lovers, but also among historians. It was in the fall of 2004 that the topic of German penal battalions surfaced. This question immediately overgrown with a bunch of legends and conjectures. German soldiers chained to machine guns and Dirlwanger's punishers were also remembered, but during the discussions, almost no one remembered either the 500s or the 999th battalions. Strictly speaking, this is not surprising: the system of penal units in Nazi Germany turned out to be so confusing that even the Germans themselves could not always decide on their assessment. In the GDR, they wrote intensively about the anti-fascist underground in the penal battalions. Veterans of the Wehrmacht from Germany in their articles convinced the reader of the opposite - the penalty box fought bravely, and their formations were almost shock groups. In response to this, it was heard: "Why, then, were special officers and reinforced police detachments walking behind them, who shot any soldier who tried to escape from the battlefield?" Note to the critics of the Stalin era - barrage detachments existed not only in the Red Army.

Actually, this question would have remained in limbo if, in the mid/late 90s of the 20th century, the German researcher Hans-Peter Klausz had not undertaken the hard work of shedding light on this confusing problem. It was from his submission that new articles and even dissertations on this topic began to appear in Germany. The volume of these materials is too large to be reproduced in detail and verbatim. Nevertheless, it will be useful for the domestic reader to get acquainted with the complex system of Wehrmacht penal units that took part in World War II. This plot will be doubly interesting due to the fact that the Soviet penal battalions were created to conduct operations exclusively against the German side. And the penal units of the Wehrmacht, in turn, were created in order to defeat the Red Army. From this point of view, the Great Patriotic War can, with some stretch, be considered a war of fines.

For all reactionary, nationalist and militaristic circles in Germany (both during the Weimar Republic and after the establishment of the Third Reich), the most traumatic experience was the fact that ordinary German soldiers supported the sailors' uprising in Kiel and Wilhelmshaven, which then grew into the November Revolution of 1918. It was these actions that put an end to the meat grinder of the First World War, abolished the monarchy and put in its place the democratic Weimar Republic. This experience was embodied in the "legend of a treacherous stab in the back." Germany lost the war not because of the military superiority of the opponents, but because thousands of deserters, simulators, "psychopaths" accumulated in the rear, from where they delivered their treacherous blow to the back of the Reichswehr. In his book "My Struggle", Adolf Hitler stated this version as follows: "In Germany, the following circumstance was also of great importance. The disintegration of the army, of course, took place everywhere - without this the November revolution could not have succeeded. But nevertheless, the main bearer of the idea of revolution and the main culprit in the decomposition of the army

was not a veteran. This "work" was carried out mainly by the scoundrels of the local garrisons or by those subjects who generally managed to portray themselves as "indispensable" and hide somewhere in the rear doing chores. These gangs also received the corresponding "additions" at the expense of deserters. At that time, tens of thousands of people deserted from the fronts to the rear, while remaining almost completely unpunished. Cowards, as you know, at all times and ages are afraid of only one thing: their own death. On the fronts, death, of course, could overtake such a coward at any day and hour. There is only one way to force cowards, weak and hesitant in spite of everything, to fulfill their duty: the deserter must know that if he runs away from the front, then he will certainly be overtaken by the fate that he most fears. The deserter must know that if he stays at the front, then only death can overtake him, and if he runs away from the front, then death will certainly overtake him. That is the whole point of the military regulations."

However, desertion was not some specific form generated by the First World War. Already in ancient times we can find a phenomenon somewhat similar to desertion. There are 12 tables in Roman laws dated 450 BC. e. there is a mention of *regai! Sho* - a war crime, which consisted in the transition of a legionnaire to the side of the enemy or flight from the battlefield, that is, the actual desertion. Legionnaires who deserted were sentenced to execution, which had several varieties: stabbing with a sword, crucifixion, beating to death with sticks or stones. Gradually, another criminal act took the place of *regaliao - sitep iaeÿae taÿÿÿÿÿÿÿÿ roriy gotapÿ iptipKa{ae*. This complex formula meant either the unauthorized abandonment of a military unit, which was equated with an action that was dangerous for the state and undermined its authority.

Code of Laws of the Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian I, adopted in 527 AD. e., contained the basic principles of army criminal law. It already made clear distinctions between desertion proper (*4ezeyuo*), unlawful abandonment of a military unit (*etapsio*), and going over to the side of the enemy (*egansio*). In the code of Justinian, the greatest attention was paid to desertion. This meant leaving the unit for a long time in order to hide from military service. Desertion was equated with leaving the sentry of his post. If we talk about the punishments for desertion, then under Justinian it was relatively mild. A deserter, for example, could be transferred to serve in a more remote and dangerous province, or they could be demoted from the cavalry (elite) to less prestigious land units. The death penalty came only in case of repeated desertion.

However, in the conditions of warfare, deserters, as a rule, were immediately executed. Aiding and harboring deserters were also prosecuted. But it is worth noting that the laws of Justinian assumed a number of extenuating circumstances that could save the deserter from the death penalty. Among them were a voluntary return to the unit, as well as a short service life.

The Germanic tribes, against whom the Roman emperors actively fought, never made such a distinction. Cowards who left the battlefield were drowned in a swamp, and traitors who went over to the side of the enemy were hung on trees. If a soldier returned alive from a battle in which

his commander died, then he was deprived of all rights, since it was believed that he left his "master" to the mercy of fate.

In later Frankish law, desertion was considered treason against the king (tYaeKa \$), and therefore, perjury. It belonged to sgÿtep taÿeÿayÿ. Regardless of the motives for which this offense was committed, the deserter was executed, and his property went to the king's treasury.

The Middle Ages in Germany made its own adjustments to the concept of desertion. At the Reichstag, held in Nuremberg in 1431, it was adopted specifically for the campaign against Bohemia

the code, in the 12th paragraph of which it was said that the deserter was to be subjected to corporal punishment and significant fines. The military laws of Emperor Maximilian I, adopted in 1508, assumed that it was the duty of every mercenary to kill a coward fleeing the battlefield. Karl \ outlawed all deserters. Anyone could kill them. The "Brandenburg Military Law and Articular Letters" (1656) reflected some of the principles of Roman law. When choosing a punishment for a deserter, the circumstances in which he committed this offense were taken into account. Usually this was reflected in the amount of the fine. The death penalty was the only form of punishment. During the trial, factors such as whether the deserter received his salary on time, whether he entered the service voluntarily or was forced, whether he suffered from hunger and thirst, whether he was young and inexperienced enough, whether he regretted what he had done, voluntarily he returned to the location of the unit. Depending on the prevailing picture, one of the numerous punishments was chosen. Frederick I of Prussia, who in 1711 ordered the ears and noses of deserters to be cut off, after which they were sent to build fortresses, had his say on this issue. In 1713, the edict of King Frederick William I ordered the confiscation of the property of deserters. Prussian military law was fully developed by 1787, when directive rules were adopted that also applied to desertion. Section 2853 read as follows: "The soldier who, according to the 16th military article, either by words or signs expressed the intention to evade service in the future, or actually left his service, is guilty of the crime of desertion." In this regard, the next 8 2854 read: "He who leaves the location of the garrison or did not arrive at the location prescribed for him, and then was captured outside the garrison, is guilty of desertion." The deserter, who was a simple soldier, was threatened with punishment in the form of 16 times passing through the system (spitzrutens). The punishment, which consisted in striking from two sides on the back in formation, in which there could be 100 or 400 people, could hardly be called conditional. In some cases, passing through the system was equated with painful death. However, the death penalty was officially imposed for those repeatedly found guilty of desertion.

In the 19th century, until a centralized German state was formed, some German lands developed their own army penal codes. This happened in Prussia in 1845 and in Bavaria in 1869. According to the Prussian army penal code, a deserter was one who, having taken the army oath, evaded military service. A person accused of desertion could prove his innocence if there were some mitigating circumstances: a delay in dismissal, refusal to help while in captivity, etc. The punishment for desertion varied between six years in a fortress and the death penalty. For unauthorized temporary abandonment of a military unit or garrison ("AWOL"), the offender could be taken into custody. If a soldier voluntarily returned to the location of the unit within 48 hours, then he could get off with only 8 days in a guardhouse. The Bavarian army penal code of 1869 made no such distinctions. In its 8 96 it was stated: "The fact of desertion does not imply that the deserter had the intention to permanently evade the performance of his military duties, for this even his temporary absence from the garrison or military unit is sufficient." Deserters in Bavaria faced up to 12 years in prison, and up to 16 years in the case of a second crime. Only those who defected to the enemy, escaped from a besieged fortress, or incited soldiers to mass desertion were sentenced to death.

After the founding of the German Empire (the "Second Empire") in January 1871, the German Imperial Army Penal Code came into force. In this regard, all previously existing army penal codes, including the Prussian and Bavarian ones mentioned above, lost their force. In the new imperial code, for the first time, a clear distinction was made between desertion and unauthorized abandonment of a unit. For a soldier to be

convicted as a deserter, it was necessary to prove that he intended either to leave military service forever, or to leave it for a long time. Although there were no indications after what period of absence from the unit a soldier could be considered a deserter. Therefore, the intention to leave military service for a long time had to be confirmed in most cases by direct and indirect evidence.

In the new imperial code, desertion was punishable whether it was a fact or only an intention. During the war, desertion was seen as an act that undermined the discipline of military units, and therefore, in combat conditions, a harsher punishment was expected for it. The first attempt at desertion was punishable by imprisonment for a term of 5 to 10 years. Escape from a besieged fortress or flight from the battlefield meant only the death penalty. Deserters who wanted to escape from the military unit were sentenced to death. Participants in mass desertion were imprisoned, but instigators and instigators were sentenced to death.

In contrast to the general criminal law, which stood for the protection of the individual, the German Imperial Military Penal Code defended primarily the interests of the soldier community. His goal was not so much to punish the criminal as to maintain military discipline at the proper level. This installation was already listed in 8 2 of the military criminal code. General criminal law was only indirectly related to military crimes and desertion. The highest principle of military criminal law was the observance of discipline - "the soul of the army itself," as Field Marshal Moltke put it in the Reichstag.

The Imperial Military Penal Code of Germany continued to be in force during the First World War. In accordance with 8 69, as a deserter, one who left the location of a military unit "in order to avoid military service forever or for a long time" was subject to punishment. That is, the soldier had to have the intention never to return to his military unit, at least until the end of the war or demobilization. In fact, the only evidence of such intentions could be the self-confession of a deserter. For this reason, sentencing a soldier precisely as a deserter was very difficult - few people wanted to aggravate their fate. But again, death sentences were handed down only in case of going over to the side of the enemy, leaving the besieged fortress or leaving the post in front of the advancing enemy. However, traitors, as a rule, were shot on the spot. And during the First World War, Germany did not have besieged fortresses. As a result, only those soldiers who tried to desert again were sentenced to death, but even then this was far from being practiced in all cases. As a result, for all four years of the First World War, the tribunals issued only 150 death sentences to German soldiers. But of these, only 48 people were executed, all the rest were pardoned, and the execution was replaced by prison

conclusion.

When Hitler's National Socialism attempted to establish world domination, measures were taken that were supposed to make it impossible to repeat the events of November 1918. In fact, a few days after the transfer of power to the NSDAP, on February 3, 1933, Hitler, in a speech to the highest ranks of the Reichswehr and the navy, stated that the creation of the Wehrmacht was the most important prerequisite for "the conquest of living space in the East and its shameless Germanization." At the same time, he stressed that the practice of universal military service should be returned. "But before that, the state leadership must make sure that those liable for military service on the eve of conscription are not infected with pacifism, Bolshevism, Marxism, at least during their service this poison will have to be removed," said the Fuhrer. This target setting was served by the unprecedented terror that was unleashed in 1933 by the SA, SS and police. It was then that tens of thousands

anti-fascists ended up in concentration camps and prisons. Many of them never got out.

Simultaneously with the intimidation and liquidation of ideological opponents of the war, many flanking measures were taken in the field of military law, army justice, disciplinary sanctions and the execution of military punishments. This was done in order to isolate potential "points of discontent" from the main body of military units, in case unreliable and subversive elements penetrated the army.

One of the first measures that was supposed to prevent a repetition of November 1918 was the appearance in the Military Code of 1935 § 13. This paragraph closed the path to the army not only for those convicted of serious crimes, but also for former political prisoners who were opponents of the National Socialist regime. They were prohibited from military service. The §13 Military Code read:

"Unworthy of military service, and at the same time not subject to military conscription are those who  
Who:

- a) has been imprisoned;
- p) was deprived of civil rights;
- c) falls under §42 of the Imperial Penal Code;
- a) was deprived by a military tribunal of the right to serve in the army;
- f) was punished by a court for anti-state activities."

If paragraph "a" excluded most of the previously convicted opponents of the regime from the army as "convicts", then paragraph "e" was specifically introduced for those who had been in the camps for a short time or received a suspended sentence. The Nazi regime assumed that in some "mild cases" political opponents could be made into normal soldiers. To do this, in April 1937, it was established that people who received nine or more months in the camps for anti-state activities were recognized as "unworthy of military service". This innovation was supposed to prevent: a) that the criminal who committed a minor offense was deprived of the honorable duty of military service to the German people, thereby causing more significant damage to the interests of the people's community; 6) the aspirations of individuals who seek to evade military service by committing minor political offenses.

Taking into account the §13 of the Military Code, it should be noted that the ban on the mentioned groups from carrying out military service was by no means a specific Nazi measure. Such actions to protect the authority of the army and morale in a military unit, to prevent sabotage, disclosure of important information, etc., are to some extent characteristic of the "internal logic" of any army. However, compared with the Kaiser's army, the circle of people "unworthy of military service" was significantly expanded. New, in fact, was the very definition of "unworthy" to carry out military service, which had a very definite propagandistic character. In the context of the return to the "ancient Germanic principles", the "unworthy" was a negative pole, opposed to the defender of the German nation and the German land.

The next milestone in the way of preventing unrest in the Wehrmacht was the formation of the secret military police and the characteristic tightening of the penal part of the laws relating to the army, and especially the Military Penal Code. The tightening of army laws took place long before Goebbels' infamous speech at the Berlin Sports Palace. Representatives of military justice drew attention to the well-known words of Ludendorff about "preparation for total war", which was expressed in the adoption of the Special Military Criminal Law, which came into force on August 17, 1938. The history of this document

can be traced back to 1934. Actually, the central point of the Special Military Criminal Law was § 5 ("Undermining combat capability").

"For undermining combat capability, they were punished by death:

Who publicly called for this or contributed to the evasion of duty in the German Wehrmacht or the allied army, or publicly sought to paralyze the will of a German or allied soldier to perform military service.

Who inclines soldiers or conscripts of the reserve to disobedience, to resistance or

the use of physical force against the commander, or desertion, or the unauthorized abandonment of the unit, or the undermining of the self-control of the soldiers of the Wehrmacht and allied armies. Who, through self-mutilation, deceit or otherwise, intends to temporarily or permanently evade military service. In some cases, they may be imprisoned. Along with the death penalty and imprisonment, total confiscation of property is permissible."

Summarizing the various, largely contradictory, penalties for undermining combat capability, it is clear that a very vague legal formulation has emerged that could be applied to any anti-war activity and attempts to evade service. In fact, anyone who was objectionable could be sentenced to death. On November 1, 1939, the Special Military Penal Law was supplemented by a "special penalty paragraph" § 5a, which gave the right to military judges to impose the death sentence on any employees if they "permitted actions against self-control and soldierly courage." It was emphasized that the death penalty was a "quite adequate punishment" if it was required in the name of maintaining the combat capability of a military unit and preserving its fighting spirit. For an expanded interpretation of this paragraph, the commentaries to the law stated that the death penalty could be applied in cases of cowardice, threats to the commander, acts of disobedience, attempts at rebellion, armed unrest, attacks on higher officials, looting, as well as in any other offenses that undermined the notorious combat capability military unit. These provisions of the Special Military Criminal Law not only opened up wide scope for legal arbitrariness, but later contributed to the emergence of a typically Nazi concept of "healthy popular sentiment", which indicated the scale of punishments that were imposed in accordance with the repeatedly updated § 5a.

Such draconian measures led to the fact that in the first months of the war alone, about 30,000 death sentences were handed down to Wehrmacht employees. But such losses would be too great. Therefore, in parallel with the executions at the beginning of the war, the "promising" practice of deprivation of liberty began to be used, which had a dual purpose: "testing" and "isolation". There was a suitable justification for both concepts: "Deprivation of liberty should not give scoundrels and cowards the opportunity to evade military service. The soldiers who left the unit should be given the opportunity to prove themselves at the front. Therefore, if special circumstances do not imply immediate execution of the sentence, then imprisonment for the duration of the war should in principle be applied" (§ 104).

The test at the front was supposed to give those sentenced to prison the opportunity "in their own or another military unit" to prove their courage and "again receive the honorable opportunity to bear arms in order to defend the German people." Only in this way could the offender earn forgiveness. However, if the preservation of discipline involved the adoption of more stringent measures (especially when it came to maintaining the combat capability of the unit), "the judge could pass a sentence on transfer to a penal camp."

Sending to penal camps became another form of punishment for the guilty. What she meant is clearly illustrated by the order of Hermann Goering, given on November 17, 1939

of the year: "The experience of the world war shows that scoundrels and cowards are often specifically subject to penalties in order to save their lives and find themselves in a safe place in the rear. Such tricks will cease if, until the end of the war, punishments are not

form of imprisonment. The convicts must stay in penal camps throughout the war, where they will face the most difficult living conditions. The time spent in the penal camp will not be counted towards the term of serving a prison sentence, which will come only after the end of the war."

On November 3, 1939, the High Command of the Wehrmacht added to the three already existing military prisons (Germersheim, Glatz and Torgau) "Regulations on the use" of penal camps. It regulated the creation of three "penal camps" in the immediate vicinity of the front line, which were considered as places of serving sentences, which preceded entry into the prison of the Wehrmacht. In particular, this document prescribed: "Stay in a penal camp, including the penal camp department of Wehrmacht prisons, does not count as a term of serving a prison sentence. Consequently, it is not the execution of punishment, but only imprisonment for an indefinite period ... Prisoners who find themselves in a penal camp must be treated with the utmost strictness. Such treatment should have a lasting deterrent effect on unsafe elements in military units and counteract attempts to evade military duty by serving a prison sentence. Only in exceptional cases, when the convicts show a complete change in everything, the camp commandant can propose to the military judge to cancel the sentence on staying in the penal camp... Prisoners wear the uniform of the corresponding unit of the Wehrmacht without emblems, epaulettes, cockades and stripes... In exceptional cases private correspondence is allowed, but not more than one sent letter in a month and a half ... Prisoners should be involved in hard physical labor, if possible, having a direct or indirect significance for the defense of the Reich ... The working day should be 10-14 hours. Breaks in working hours for meals should be calculated taking into account the availability of daylight. On Sundays and holidays, the working day should last at least 4 hours ... Along with work, daily drill training (without weapons) must be carried out, thereby accustoming prisoners to discipline. Structural training should be carried out before and after the completion of work. If working time has not been fully used, then it must be compensated by drill training. Prisoners should not be able to read books and other literature. Board games and other entertainment are prohibited. After work is completed, the artificial light is turned off in the premises ... Any disciplinary violations should be punished with all severity, including the use of weapons should not be afraid ... if the prisoners do not earn any wages and salaries, they should receive 70% of the minimum food ration (650 g of bread daily)."

Obviously, the High Command of the Wehrmacht proceeded from the fact that this dual principle of punitive punishment in the conditions of a temporary waiver of imprisonment did not correspond to the urgent tasks of the army. In any case, the letter sent to Wehrmacht prisons ended with the words: "To the heads of the penal camps, by December 1, 1940, submit short reports on the experience gained and proposals for changing existing regulations." As for the punishment for the purpose of passing the "test", the legal department of the Wehrmacht during 1940 sent its representatives to the front line, who found out that such actions "justified themselves during the Polish campaign, where groups of penalists had a direct collision with the enemy." It was emphasized that "many of the prisoners atoned for their crimes by demonstrating extraordinary courage." Consequently, their actions served as the basis for a pardon, which was provided for by 88 112-116 of the Military Criminal Procedure, part of the UT ("Right to pardon").

Of course, problems began to arise. In particular, they were associated with those areas and time periods where and when no direct hostilities took place. The document of the legal department of the Wehrmacht cited above stated on this occasion: "For most of the Wehrmacht, the principled imposition of severe punishments was not correct. They apply where true redemption through courage is really possible, but not where the justice of the Wehrmacht is a mere formality. This impression was aggravated by the widespread opinion that after the end of the war all prisoners would be subject to an amnesty.

The consequence of such sentiments was an obvious increase in crime and a weakening of military discipline. As a result, the number of crimes and offenses committed by Wehrmacht employees increased from 7065 (from August 28 to December 31, 1931) to 7916 in the first quarter of 1940 alone. In terms of "civil crimes and unauthorized abandonment of the unit", the increase was 48%, which in absolute numbers is as follows: from 2935 to 4338. To counteract this negative trend, more flexible and effective methods were required. The existing model of "test" and "isolation" was clearly not enough. After the war, the former Judge General of the Imperial Military Court, Erich Lattmann, recalled on this occasion: "The maintenance of discipline, which was greatly weakened after the Polish campaign, made it necessary to apply all types of punishments, including imprisonment, that could be applied in peaceful, calm times." Between the penal camp, intended for the most difficult, "hard to educate" cases, and serving a sentence in the form of a "trial by the front", there were changes made in May 1940 to 8104 of the Military Criminal Procedure, which provided for the possibility of full or partial imprisonment. These changes in the penitentiary system led to a certain unloading of Wehrmacht prisons. As Karl Siegfried recalled

Bader, one of the employees of these prisons: "In the absence of cases of release from prisons of those convicted of even minor offenses, there was a real threat of their overflow." The circle of those who were to be kept in the correctional camps was clearly defined: "former convicted of serious crimes that cannot be corrected even after serving their sentences, who threatened discipline in military units, deviators, rebels, homosexuals." As of July 31, 1940, there were 7,746 prisoners in Wehrmacht prisons. Almost every fourth of them was sent to correctional camps. Up to this point, in fact, any sentences to army officials in terms of deprivation of liberty meant going to prison. Several factors were required to get into prison. According to § 31 of the army criminal code, military courts, when imposing a death sentence and a sentence of imprisonment (in rare cases, castration), had to deprive the offender of his military rank and exclude him from the ranks of the Wehrmacht. "Unworthy of military service", having left the ranks of the armed forces, automatically fell under the action of civil justice. An agreement between the High Command of the Wehrmacht and the Reich Ministry of Justice provided that such people were to be interned in detention camps, which closely resembled concentration camps. In Wehrmacht officer circles, it was believed that serving a prison sentence in the "bog camps" along the Ems River was "incomparably more effective" than staying in ordinary places.

conclusions.

After the Nazi seizure of power on January 30, 1933, the new imperial government used as a pretext the burning of the Reichstag in order to push the imperial president Hindenburg to issue emergency decrees "for the protection of the people and the state", which effectively ended democratic rights and freedoms. Now any political opponents of the Nazis on charges of endangering public order could be arrested for an unlimited period. During March

and April 1933, more than 25 thousand people were arrested in Prussia alone. First it was the communists, then the social democrats. Then it was the turn of trade unionists and other objectionable personalities. Having begun mass arrests, the imperial government was faced with one very significant problem - prison overcrowding. Then the search began for the possibility of organizing special places of detention, where the arrested could "undergo re-education" and "join as full-fledged members in the people's community." An example to follow was set by the Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler, who, as chief of the Bavarian police, ordered the creation of the Dachau concentration camp on March 20, 1933. In those days, between Himmler and Hermann Göring, who headed the Prussian Ministry of the Interior, there was a tacit struggle for influence in the police apparatus. Goering did not want to lag behind and at the end of March turned to the leadership of the city of Osnabrück with a request to allocate territory for the construction of barracks, which would have accommodated 250-300 prisoners. The new camp had to meet the following requirements: "It should be a well-visible place, which, if possible, should be removed from the industrial center, but at the same time



provides for the possibility of using prisoners in socially useful work. This may be the drainage of swamps, uprooting of trees, etc. The placement of prisoners should not involve significant material costs."

In Osnabrück, they showed an increased interest in this undertaking. Goering was told that it would be more logical to use the vicinity of Ems to create the camp, where as early as 1924 they began to use the labor of prisoners. Omitting the vicissitudes of the development of the camp system, we note that in the Ems district a whole network of camps arose, which the Nazi leadership considered exemplary. The prisoners who were there were supposed to participate in the construction of the "Siegfried Line", the reclamation of the surroundings, the construction of a dam on the Elbe, the construction of the imperial autobahn on the Kaiserleiten-Saarbrücken section. The beginning of the Second World War made its amendments to the plans of the camp management. But the most significant moment turned out to be that in the Ems camps the composition of prisoners began to change. If earlier they were political prisoners, then after the start of the war, deserters and war criminals began to

The system of execution of punishments here was very reminiscent of being in a concentration camp, as noted after consultations of the legal department with the Ministry of Justice. The military judge in the High Command of the Land Forces, Hans Mayer-Brancke, recommended in this regard that "the correctional camps near Ems, which are under the jurisdiction of the Reich Ministry, correspond in terms of the severity of punishment to the Wehrmacht penal camps." For security reasons, it was supposed to make a few exceptions, which, however, were minor. On this occasion, the Imperial Minister of Justice reported: "First of all, exclude from those transferred to correctional camps:

a) sentenced to life imprisonment;

p) convicted of treason, treason or disclosure of military secrets;

c) convicts who have physical disabilities or suffer from chronic diseases, in particular tuberculosis, diseases of internal organs and venereal diseases;

a) convicts who are prone to escape.

These people should have been sent to "normal" prisons. At the same time, the former soldiers who ended up in the Ems camps were considered only "temporarily staying", that is, the real serving of the sentence should have begun only after the end of the war.

## Chapter 2

### Special units of the Wehrmacht on the eve of the outbreak of World War II

Along with the "unworthy of military service", who were convicted by civil and military courts, there was also a third group that had long attracted the attention of the military leadership. These were those liable for military service who did not obey orders, who, due to their personal qualities (indiscipline, stubbornness, lethargy, "non-military" behavior, etc.), jeopardized the conduct of a military operation. Among them were those who were punished by officers from time to time, that is, they did not take disciplinary sanctions seriously. In the language of the officers, these people were listed as "disciplinary-difficult elements." It should be noted that their faults were not large, and therefore the "difficult elements" did not fall under the action of judicial sanctions.

After long discussions in various structures of the War Ministry and the Wehrmacht, in 1936 a decision was made: to form the so-called "special units" from the mentioned circle of people, which would officially receive the status of "educational units". The new units were also supposed to serve in order to take into their ranks those liable for military service and soldiers who, due to their previous convictions, were considered "dangerous for maintaining self-control in a military unit," but at the same time, there were no reasons or reasons to do them "unworthy of military service.

The immediate impetus for the appearance of such considerations was a letter sent on January 22, 1936 by the Wehrmacht Office of the War Ministry to the commanders of the three branches of the armed forces. In particular, it said: "In connection with cases of refusal to serve for political reasons, including the communist way of thinking, it was decided to create special penal units. The period spent in them should not be counted towards the period of military service. Please submit your comments by February 25th. Wolfgang Kern summarized the subsequent development of affairs: "The command of the three types of armed forces, as well as representatives of the legal department and the Wehrmacht department of the Imperial War Ministry took part in the discussion of the issue of creating such units. The command of the navy, supported from time to time by representatives of the Luftwaffe, insisted that the creation of special units from among the "unworthy of service" should not take place within the framework of the Wehrmacht. After intense discussions, the point of view prevailed - to create "special units" not from among the "unworthy of military service", but from "hard-to-educate Wehrmacht soldiers ... the creation of an all-army administration was provided as the highest authority for such formations."

At the same time, it was overlooked that the creation of "special units" was significantly influenced by representatives of German military psychiatry, who were considered "assistants of military justice" in strengthening the effectiveness of the military unit. As one joker noted, in this area they were "flank cover." Already on April 2, 1936, the Minister of War received the chief army sanitary inspector, whose sphere of activity also included military psychiatry. After the report of the inspector, the following agreement was adopted: "In order to cover dissatisfied conscripts and at the same time not overload the military unit with their education, the idea was developed to create educational units. The military judge Zemler must keep in touch with the sanitary inspector, in order to then submit a report to the Minister. In the same month, the patriarch of German military psychiatry, Ewald Stir, expressed his opinion. Referring to the ongoing discussion, he took as a basis the formulations of military lawyers. The indicated circle of people who caused the undermining of discipline in the unit, he generically called

"psychopaths". Considering the fact that "the accumulation of inferior elements in the rear carries almost a greater danger than their use at the front," Stir suggested using them for a "future war": "Only the relatively weak-minded and relatively inferior should be used in the rear, and more dangerous elements should be sent to concentration camps." "Use in the rear" did not at all imply civilian occupations, but military service in a dangerous front-line zone. In 1938, another military psychiatrist recommended that in no case should the issue of leave for "less dangerous elements" be raised. "The dismissal could have an extremely detrimental effect on physically healthy, but at the same time, mentally ill or feeble-minded elements, who, in terms of their character, differ from other people, are not amenable to the perception of ethical attitudes and

upbringing."

And further: "For the correction of such unstable, environmentally dependent psychopathic qualities and ways of responding, a premium is due, which could be collected easily by eradicating dissatisfaction with the service, indifference, refusal to comply with discipline, active stubbornness and empty indifference." How exactly it was supposed to exclude "harmful influence" was already explained in 1940 at the next meeting of military psychiatrists: "Based on experience, we can say that horror for the commander of a combined arms unit is those psychopathic soldiers who know how to behave in such a way that they do not fall under the action of military courts, but at the same time again and again continue to interfere with military order and discipline. Since the unit must be freed from such elements, they must be collected in special units. In them, during hard work, they will face the most severe disciplinary treatment. They will have limited rations. They will not be able to hide from enemy shelling and other dangers of war, as they will carry out military service. The example of these people is likely to keep others dissatisfied with the service from violating discipline.

The above facts speak for themselves. There is no doubt that the ideas expressed by individual representatives of German military psychiatry were the basis for

the creation of special teams, which, in the order of the Imperial Minister of War of May 25, 1936, were called "camp formations", and later received the name "special units of the Wehrmacht". We emphasize once again that these "special units" were created in peacetime. Already in November 1937, a special order was issued. It was from this moment that the soldiers who fell into them, with further disobedience to orders, could be sent to concentration camps.

So, let's look at the structure of the "special units of the Wehrmacht" at the time of their creation, that is, on October 6, 1936. "Special Unit 1" was located in Shtablak (military district G). For the military districts P and III, a single "Special Unit P" was supposed in Altengrabow. In Königsbrück there was a "Special Unit PI" (military districts IM and YP). "Special unit M" in Münsingen covered the military districts U and KP. The "Special Unit of the UP" (the military district of the UP) was based in Grafenwöhr. Military districts IX and XI were supposed to have a "Special Unit IX" (Bergen). And, finally, in Munster there was a "Special Unit X" (military district MI and X). However, in the classifier of the High Command of the Ground Forces and the "Directives for the Education of the Composition of Special Units" dated February 2, 1937, there is no "Special Unit Bergen". It was either closed or never created. And on January 31, 1937 (apparently, instead of him), the Ordrurf Special Unit was formed. In 1938, the YP Special Unit was transferred to the Van training ground. Within the framework of the navy, a special unit was also formed, which was initially located in East Prussia. On October 1, 1937, it was transferred to Altenwald, being directly subordinate to the commandant of the North Frisian fortifications. In peacetime, a special unit was formed under the Luftwaffe. Its formation began in April

1937. This unit was designated by the Arabic numeral "7" and was located in Dedelstorf (Gifhorn district).

To determine the circle of people who will fall into these special units, on May 25, 1936, a special order was adopted. It stated:

"a) persons liable for military service who, on the basis of their past, should be considered as a threat to the discipline of the unit if they did not behave impeccably while serving their labor service;

B) soldiers whose stay in the unit is undesirable because of their behavior, way of thinking, life attitudes;

c) soldiers who have been punished by the courts for shameful actions, and subsequently, for official and disciplinary reasons, the continuation of their service is undesirable."

The list of persons liable for military service mentioned in the first paragraph was updated on July 17, 1936. Then a new order was issued. Now, "as a rule", it was about those liable for military service who were convicted at one time:

a) for the intentional commission of crimes punishable by imprisonment for a term exceeding one year;

B) convicted under 88 175, 175a or 1755 of the Imperial Penal Code.

Until then, there were only 8 20 "Orders on Examination and Arrest" dated March 21, 1936, indicating not to use such individuals in the future for active military service. Further, the letter stated: "In the cases indicated in paragraphs a) and b), the commander of the unit sends his opinion to the military inspector, and that to the commander of the military district. He decides whether the former prisoner can remain in the location of the unit or should be sent to a special unit. When deciding on paragraph a), not only the measure of punishment was taken into account, but also the committed criminal act, which should not have been a shameful act. As such, theft, rape, robbery, etc. were considered, but at the same time, mutilation, violation

inviolability of the home, insults. When making a decision, the military leadership took into account the behavior while serving the imperial labor service.

Insufficient information about the "shameful" or "not shameful" criminal act in the cases of those convicted of anti-state activities had to be compensated by studying the question to what extent these were political cases. As already mentioned, "unworthy of military service" were all those who stayed in prisons and camps for more than 9 months on "anti-state" articles. Convicted for anti-state activities, but who turned out to be "worthy of military service", were sent not to "special units", but to regular units. This is how things worked out in practice. As you can see, "special units" were intended for special cases. For example, for those who, despite the crime committed and a long prison term, were still not deprived of the "honor to serve in the military." As a rule, this was influenced by mitigating circumstances, for example, the young age of the criminals, etc. But even these people arrived at first in the regular unit, having a special mark in the documents. The researchers managed to find only one case when a person liable for military service was sent to a "special unit". It was about shooter T., born in 1915, who was convicted on the eve of being drafted into the army. The head of the "special unit X" wrote about him: "T. has a good character. He makes a good impression, but nevertheless, during the political turmoil of 1932, he fell into the wrong hands and was eventually convicted in 1933 of anti-state activities. He was imprisoned for 1 year 9 months. Obviously, such a harsh punishment caused the necessary purification and repentance.

One of the undated documents, written by the chief field doctor Otto Wut, spoke of the study of questionnaires in seven "special units". In the end, it all came down to the question of taking into account adherents of leftist ideas and members of the KKE. It is worth noting that Wut himself was the head of the department of military psychiatry and military psychology at the Military Medical Academy, as well as the chairman of the council of military sanitary inspectors. In the table prepared by him, which, alas, did not contain any absolute figures, the column "CPG" indicated 4%. The second table referred to 200 examined servicemen who were in "special units". It reported on 14 communists, which accounted for 7% of the total composition. Along with such individuals who, like the aforementioned shooter T., were convicted only for political offenses, there were "political" ones who were convicted under criminal articles (which did not exclude a purely criminal component). This applied primarily to economic articles, for example, crimes against property. A relatively small proportion of "political" clearly indicates that the "special units" were not focused primarily on the "acceptance" of conscious anti-militarists and, accordingly, political opponents of the Nazi regime. Even the fact that individual cases of fundamental refusal to perform military service for political or religious reasons did not change anything in principle. In addition to the mentioned criminals (primarily thieves), in a document dated May 25, 1936, the second category intended for sending to "special units" were those convicted under Article 175 (homosexuality). The threat (actual or imaginary) posed by homosexuals was described in 1957 by Major General Ratcliffe, who, in his own words, "before the war was for three years the commandant of the largest prison in the Wehrmacht." In the journal *The Art of War*, he reported the following: "The particular danger in the part was that the true homosexual did not seek contact with people of the same inclinations, but was directed towards young unspoiled youths. The command should remember the case with the junker, who became the victim of a cunning seducer. The young man shot himself at the grave of his father, who could not survive the shame. And this is just one of the many tragic cases that have remained in memory.

If, despite the pathological hatred that most ideological National Socialists felt towards homosexuals, those convicted under 8,175 were left in the army, then such a decision had two reasons. For example, they corresponded to the ideas that were put in the commentary on the concept of "anti-state activity". Military psychological theorists were sure that a significant part of the convicts at 8,175 only once "lost their way", and therefore, through re-education, they could be returned to

correct, heterosexual positions. In 1942, Otto Wuth formulated the second aspect. It read as follows: "expulsion from the ranks of the Wehrmacht for" unnatural debauchery "could be considered by many of these psychopaths as an encouragement, and therefore indicated an easy way for these unworthy elements to emulate." The assignment to "special units" was supposed to prevent such a negative trend. Otto Wut's calculations, mentioned earlier, make it possible to determine the proportion of alleged and actual homosexuals from the total number of employees of "special units". In one of the statistical tables compiled by him, the column "homosexuals" contains figures - 23 people, 11.5%. In another table, which contains only relative figures, it appears - 16%.

It is necessary to pay special attention to paragraph B) of the order of May 25, 1936. Namely, those soldiers, "whose stay in the unit is undesirable because of their behavior, way of thinking, life attitudes." In this regard, the documents stated: "In most cases, these include soldiers who did not comply with the order for timely arrival at the unit, but were later brought to it by force." However, the vague wording of paragraph B) concerned a much larger number of people. Absolutely

fuzzy, predominantly "state-political" and military-police formulations made it possible to create criteria that could be applied to any military personnel. In fact, the direction to the "special unit" became a kind of arbitrariness. It is obvious that, speaking of military effectiveness, "the effectiveness of a military unit," the leadership of the Wehrmacht focused primarily on establishing strict order.

Finally, the mentioned criteria were "refined" several times during 1937. This time, the views of military psychiatry were used, which helped unit commanders to rely until 1940 on the classic typology of Kurt Schneider. It read: "a) special departments are intended, according to the instructions, for difficult-to-educate military personnel. These include lazy, careless, slovenly, protesters, stubborn, anti-and asocial, cruel, unbridled elements, liars and swindlers, succumbing to instinctive impulses, in other words, psychopaths, who are labeled as hyperthymics, obsessed with grandeur, with an unstable mood, weak-willed and callous. In a nutshell: violators who show poor will to serve. Further, for special units are people with a mild form of dementia, which borders on physiological stupidity, with characteristic moral defects. For military units, they are especially dangerous elements. Those soldiers who have committed crimes under the influence of alcohol are also suitable for re-education in special units ... B) the mentally ill, as well as completely feeble-minded, are not intended to serve in special units. People suffering from mental depression and painful sensitivity should not serve in special units. In short, losers who cannot perform military service."

Detailed in this typology, the distinctions between "psychopaths", "violators" and "losers" were widespread in German army psychiatry, starting almost since the First World War. Moreover, the political content of the "violators" remained unchanged for decades. Chief Medical Officer Simon continued this tradition. On at least November 2, 1937, in Munich, he gave a report to the highest ranks of the Wehrmacht and the SA on the topic "The problem of psychopaths in the Wehrmacht." Based on the report of this meeting published in 1938 by the Military Medical Society, it can be established that Simon continued to distinguish between the so-called psychopaths, losers and transgressors. It is noteworthy that he considered the "violators" to be "the left wing of psychopaths." He repeatedly emphasized this: "We know that this left wing of psychopaths cannot be used in the war as soldiers. But, on the other hand, the accumulation of such elements in the rear would represent an even greater danger than their use at the front. We experienced in the war, especially at the end of the war, during the revolution of 1918, during the Spartacist rebellion, how harmful the activity of the left wing of psychopaths can be.

Simon demanded early recognition of "leftist psychopaths", the compilation of special lists and mandatory strict control over them, as in infectious diseases. "This information should be recorded by authorities, for example, by health departments or, probably even better, by the police, so that in the event of a threat to the state, dangerous elements can be immediately isolated before they begin to develop their harmful activities. Since left-wing psychopaths can neither be used at the front nor left in the rear, they must be under special control. Mr. Stir suggested sending the most dangerous of them to concentration camps. I believe that they can be used in camps, in which during the hostilities there will be many free places for labor service. We are able to identify a psychopath, we know about the existence of the left wing, we know how dangerous it is." As you can see, the vague use of the concept of "psychopath", which at that time was considered very conditional,

on the one hand, it served to discredit the political opponents of Nazism, on the other hand, it contributed to the fact that really mentally ill people were pushed into the path of committing crimes.

In the end, such formulations only concealed the "scientific", as well as ideological preparation of Nazism for the destruction of antipathetic minorities, socially marginal groups, political opponents, who were supposedly "unviable". Among the listeners of Simon's cited report was General Reichenau, head of the Wehrmacht department in the Imperial War Office. It was he who began the discussion of the report in the journal German Military Doctor. As German historians wrote: "He was characterized by the position: save everything that needs to be saved, and let everything that needs to be destroyed collapse." It was a quote from the general regarding Simon's report. As a result, in practice, everything looked exactly as the general said. The place where the notorious "salvation" or the inevitable "destruction" was to take place should have been precisely the "special units".

Officially, the staff of the "special units" was to be authorized and instructor personnel. It had to be chosen with great care. The main task of the selected team was "education to unconditional obedience", "return of the guilty to a lawful and orderly life", influence on their perception of the state, people, turning into skilled soldiers. Where the "re-education" was most successful, the "special unit" within three months could be turned into an ordinary regular army unit.

There are several reports on the number of "special units" in the period 1936-1938. The number of each of them ranged from 55 to 84 people. The total number of seven "special units" (as of October 31, 1936) was 483 people without full-time personnel, of which 99 people were sent from recruiting centers, and 384 from military units for repeated violations of discipline. According to the documents, by February 28, 1937, only six "special units" remained in the army. At the same time, their number increased to 664 people (241 - got straight from the recruiting centers). A year later, in 1938, the seventh "special unit" re-emerged. At that moment, there were 1,357 offenders in these military units. If we talk about the "special units" of the Luftwaffe and the navy, then there is no clear data. We can only say that before the start of the war, from 3 to 6 thousand people passed through them.

Before we turn to the plot of how the instructions of the key psychologist of the Wehrmacht influenced the composition of the "special units", let's look at the results of Wut's survey: "There is a fairly high proportion of soldiers who are predisposed to alcohol (11%) and the desire to make debts (11%). An even larger proportion are womanizers (39%), with 15% having illegitimate children. No dementia(...) a few suicides and suicide attempts, a little psychopathy. (...) The majority does not show a lack of intelligence (...) the overwhelming majority are cheerful, comradely-minded, but have repeatedly shown weak will (...) From a sociological point of view, these soldiers come mainly from the lower strata.

We find among them pupils of boarding schools - 9% ... A large number attempted suicide - 24% ... A high number of illegitimate children - 10%. The only children in the family are 17%, as a result, they were not ready to be drafted into the army. At the same time, 15% of the family had problems - quarrels of parents. The negative impact of the environment is obvious."

If Otto Wut stated in general, when considering the "special units", "a little psychopathy", then when comparing the two groups - immediately sent to the "special units" and transferred there from the regular army, some differences can be found. In the first case, 3.3% suffered from the notorious "psychopathy", while in the second group this figure increased to 25.31%. Such a negative comparison

was also observed according to other criteria: a tendency to alcoholism, respectively, 6.61% and 31.64%; "isolation" - 19.83% and 32.91%; "moderate dementia (mental limitation)" - 6.61% and 16.45%.

A criminal past was revealed in 13% of the respondents. Moreover, 51% committed crimes against property, 8% were convicted of hooliganism, 6% for crimes against morality (this group did not include homosexuals). According to statistics, 23% of those who ended up in "special units" passed through 8,175 (homosexuality). It is noteworthy that among the respondents, only 1% had a criminal record for "high treason". If we talk about military violations, then more than half had such. Moreover, 42% were subjected to disciplinary sanctions, and 33% ended up in military courts. Some of the employees committed more than ten military offenses. Concerning the guilty in the ranks of the armed forces, Wut concluded: "The inability to get used to the new conditions prevailed (exceeding the stay on vacation, unauthorized abandonment of the unit, stubbornness). Partly, thieves and swindlers did not give up their criminal inclinations - 27%. According to Wut, 5% were punished for cheating, 4% for embezzlement, and 13% for stealing from comrades. The classic military offenses looked like this: excess vacation - 28%, unauthorized abandonment of the unit - 13%, desertion - 7%, stubbornness - 33%. In the column "espionage" there was a dash. Another 16% ended up in "special units" for neglecting bearing. Wut's final conclusion was: "In essence, the results of psychiatric testing coincide with the results of military developments - 60% are quite educated."

Meanwhile, leading representatives of psychologists from the ranks of the Wehrmacht regretted the heterogeneous composition of the "special units." According to Dr. Negelsbach, the main obstacle in achieving the "educational goal" was precisely such "heterogeneity". Negelsbach and his colleague Hesselmann saw the "heterogeneous composition" as "the biggest problem of the "special units": "The personnel of the special units is extremely diverse in terms of the types represented there. The command of the military district sends here people with several convictions and those who expressed dissatisfaction with their service in the army, that is, they simply did not comply with the order. Elements unworthy of service are among those who are disoriented by their own or others' thoughts, socially frightened or disappointed. By their inclinations, they are by no means morally defective. Often, as their military upbringing progresses, they abandon the past and become fit for service."

Bearing in mind the phrase about "several convictions", let us recall that it is not imprisonment that is meant, since they automatically led to "unworthiness to serve". When Negelsbach speaks of "elements unworthy of service," he does not mean the specific Nazi formulation "unworthy of military service,"<sup>21</sup> but a psychological thesis, an expanded concept of dignity and honor on which the views of most German military psychologists were based: "Among those transferred from regular units there are a small group of terrified people who were wrongly punished. In fact, among them there may be difficult-to-educate people who cannot be dealt with in a team. They require special handling. Here you can find a variety of

deviations that are difficult to detect in a certain set of special units. As an example, the following groups can be distinguished:

- deceived and disoriented elements, who may hide good will inside, can be guided on the right path by small skillful educational techniques;
- really difficult to educate, with deeply rooted erroneous life attitudes that interfere with the normal activity of the unit - a relatively small group;
- morally inferior, incapable of improvement people with the manifestation of psychopathic defects. Morally unhealthy. People of unbridled instincts. Sex perverts. All these people show their asocial nature.
- morally impeccable, well-behaved, but weak-willed psychopaths, dreamers, dreamers, afraid of life, who are unable to endure the harsh reality. Often neurotics with mental depression and involuntary impulses to escape from reality.
- well-behaved people with intellectual defects. Sometimes feeble-minded. They can neither perceive their environment nor give an account of their own deeds. They act on the basis of the moment, follow intuition, and therefore are sometimes in conflict with the laws.

It can be seen from this design that special units, as a means of getting rid of undesirable elements in military units, need to be repeatedly restructured. At the same time, sometimes gross errors lead to disciplinary and administrative violations. Thus, it turns out that people are transferred to special units due to a misunderstanding. In some cases, these people are already unfit for service."

Negelsbach, a future employee of the Service for the Study of Suitability, based on his observations, concluded: "On the other hand, the most noble task of the psychological personnel of the military unit is to separate the really difficult to educate, in fact, group two, for which the special unit, from group one, which can be re-educated by ordinary disciplinary means, and, in turn, from the absolutely inferior group three, while the special sanitary services must check the suitability for service of the representatives of groups four and five.

If representatives of the first group could be left in regular military units, then the last two groups were considered by Negelsbach as absolutely unfit for service. At the same time, he insisted on further expanding the list of criteria by which one could be expelled from the army. However, it was most effective to develop a draft settlement of "really hopeless cases", which were to be sent to "special units". Negelsbach wrote: "The fact is that the majority of the members of the mentioned groups of psychopaths, for purely psychological reasons, can never be taken into account for field service in the army. The alternative to a special unit will not change anything, but will only slow down the resolution of the issue and put an end to the past work of the special units. It would be desirable that, thanks to appropriate agreements with the army sanitary inspectorates, Din-aig! 1 would be able to cooperate on this issue with the competent medical services, so that, by common collective decision, really hopeless cases would be written off from military service and would find application outside the Wehrmacht.

The fate of the representatives of the fourth and fifth groups, whom Negelsbach designated as "good-natured", had to be decided on a case-by-case basis. Depending on the psychological characteristics and socio-economic considerations, they could be used either at ordinary enterprises or in special closed formations. At the same time, Negelsbach managed to emphasize that this is being done "by no means out of a falsely understood principle of humanism, but in the name of the benefit of the entire military unit." Seemingly in this place it was indicated that by 1939



it was supposed to end the program of euthanasia of handicapped children, and therefore, this problem should, as it were, be exhausted by itself. According to Negelsbach, also "morally defective people incapable of improvement" (group three) should, if possible, be exempted from military service, but without bypassing the "special unit". It is noteworthy that the psychologist of the Wehrmacht draws attention to the fact that such people in civilian conditions never manifested their criminal

inclinations. He is talking here about "a group of absolutely inferior, incapable of improvement people who cannot be criminal in civilian conditions of life, or do not correspond, in any case, to the requirements of the soldier's service due to the moral structure that cannot be influenced." As an organizational consequence, a special institution (outside the Wehrmacht) should have arisen that would use these poor fellows as a workforce.

Under this phrase, nothing more than a concentration camp was hidden, which should be created in advance for people with pronounced criminal inclinations: "Is it generally necessary to send people with pronounced criminal inclinations to a special unit? This question seems to me at least very controversial. Without a doubt, there are cases where it can be established from the outset that people are incapable of improvement, and their assignment to a special unit is a waste of time. But in some cases, the assignment to a special unit is the last attempt by the Wehrmacht to educate a person, even if the chances of this are slim.

Next, we have to understand how this "educational attempt" by the Wehrmacht was implemented in practice in different ways in the "special units" of the peace period. The memories of the employees of the pre-war "special units" have not reached us, for this reason we will have to rely only on official Nazi documents. For the location of the "camp soldiers" (one of the first names), it was necessary to select the most remote barracks as far as possible. Sympathy was never a hallmark of the Nazi camp system, but here we are confronted with a special case. One of the documents prescribed: "We must resist the fact that soldiers spend all their free time in their barracks, where they indulge in useless activities. The presence of comradely houses, reading rooms, libraries, choir halls, reading instructive reports, physical exercises that will postpone the return to the barracks is obligatory. The internal routine of the employees of a special unit, which differed from the regular staff by the presence of special buttonholes, was initially regulated by the "Rules for Special Units", which were adopted on August 7, 1936. But as the "special units" developed, the regime in them became tougher. For example, one can only quote the service instruction of March 26, 1938, designed specifically for "special units." It said that the employees of the "special unit", in contrast to the employees of the ordinary military unit of the Wehrmacht, along with the general "military education", had to additionally perform labor tasks. This "additional labor duty" concerned primarily the employees of those "units" in which soldiers with bad behavior were isolated. These soldiers were not supposed to have a negative impact on other trainees.

"Special units" differed from the regular units of the Wehrmacht not only by the rules for granting leave, but by the absence of the principle of "salary and food rations." Leave was granted only "in exceptional cases with unusually good behavior." Employees of "special units" were to be under special and continuous supervision. Particular attention was to be paid to the correspondence of "camp soldiers", as well as any communication with civilians. Forbidden topics for conversation were: sex, discussion of property issues, attempts to evade service, anti-state statements. At the same time, the employees of the "special units" should not have had the feeling that they were being watched, and their life was completely regulated by rules and orders. Most likely, they should have been imbued with the idea of self-education, the awakening of responsibility to society and the military unit.

It is quite obvious that "education" in the "special divisions" should have been based not only on firmness, but also on the classical principle of carrot and stick. I emphasize that in the pre-war period, some pedagogical elements still took place. But in many cases they were not able to change the "military qualities" of the "special soldiers". Taking into account the exceptionally high level of desertion from the Wehrmacht in the pre-war period, the only method of "education" remained the same "whip". While the staff involved in "education", on the one hand, had to observe "self-respect" and allegedly tried to refrain from "insults and offensive reproaches", but, on the other hand, we could see a different picture. One of the instructions stated: "Servants of special units who maliciously oppose all measures of an educational nature, at the suggestion of the command of a special unit, may temporarily leave military service and be placed at the disposal of the police." This phrase once again concealed a "business trip" to a concentration camp. The "terms of transfer" to the smallest detail were settled in late 1937 - early 1938 in an agreement between the Reich War Office and the Reichsfuehrer SS.

Before the commander of the "special unit" applied for discharge from military service and for the transfer of former employees into the hands of the police, a formal warning had to be made. On the appropriate form, among other things, it was necessary to say: "I paid attention (the name of the recalcitrant was indicated) to the fact that I was giving him one last chance to correct his behavior. In the event of subsequent misconduct and refusal to comply with the order, I will petition for his dismissal from the armed forces and transfer to the police. At the same time, I pointed out to him the serious consequences of such a dismissal." According to the official plan, incorrigible "special soldiers" were to be transferred to nearby concentration camps. At the beginning of 1938, along with Sachsenhausen, there were camps Dachau and Buchenwald. In May 1938, the Flossenburg camp was added to this list, and Mauthausen was added in August of the same year. Specific indications of the number of prisoners sent from "special units" to camps in the pre-war period exist only in relation to Buchenwald. In the reports prepared in this concentration camp on June 1, 1938, along with the columns "polit." and "Prof. - Prest." appeared the inscription "from special. - dr. Verm." (CAB). However, at first there was a dash in this column. The first prisoner from among the "special soldiers" appeared here for the first time in the period from June 16 to July 1, 1938. The second came to Buchenwald at the end of July 1938. On the reverse side of the camp reports, it was indicated that in both cases it was about "sabotage". In the prisoner's file cabinet, a card of a certain Peter R. was preserved, in which one could read: "On November 4, 1938, he was hanged." In the second half of October 1938, the number of SAW prisoners in Buchenwald reached 18 people. With a total number of prisoners of 10 thousand, this was a very small proportion. At the end of December 1938, 22 CAB prisoners were already registered. In the "CAB" column, in addition to "arrival", a "departure" section appeared, that is, we can say that the first dead appeared among the CAB. Meanwhile, growth has been steady, though not rapid. In June 1939, there were 29 CAB prisoners. On the eve of the start of World War II, with 2 "departed", there were already 33 of them. That is, it turns out that in total, in the pre-war period, 36 "special soldiers" were "transferred" from "special units" to Buchenwald. The names of these unfortunates have been preserved. Most of them were born in 1914-1915 (in rare cases, 1918-1919). At the same time, one prisoner was designated as "a quarter of a Jew." Another noteworthy fact: in the general card index of prisoners, CAB prisoners were designated as "political". In the system of abbreviations generally accepted in the SS, they had the index "ra" (political), and only in isolated cases "Syy. - N. (arrest of a suspect as a measure of restraint) or "roi. Ss.". (arrest of a politically suspected person as a measure of restraint). In October 1938, instead of the abbreviation "SAM /" (CAB) began to be used "Meÿgt. - Updey "(Wehrmacht soldier).

If we extrapolate these data, it turns out that in the pre-war period, about 180 people were sent from the "special units" of the Wehrmacht to concentration camps. However, this figure is very approximate, especially if we take into account the fact that the Flossenburg and Mauthausen camps created in 1938 could hardly

accept CAB-prisoners. After making an adjustment, one can come to the conclusion that the total number of SAW prisoners at the moment was about 120 people. An indirect confirmation of such a relatively small number of prisoners can be the statement of Kurt Holstein, made in 1943. In it, he said that being sent to a concentration camp in "peacetime was an exceptional case." But for former employees of the Wehrmacht, this was little consolation. More than a hundred people experienced the SS terror machine, which, according to the point of view of the Wehrmacht command, was the implementation of "a special form of the principle of general military service."

#### Chapter 3 From the Wehrmacht to the concentration camp

But let's consider the further fate of the "special units". The statement that a written warning should precede the sending of a soldier to a concentration camp, in fact, ceased to be valid in the event of mobilization. In the event of mobilization, that is, the start of the war, the "special units" were disbanded, and new rules came into force, which read as follows: "The composition of special units, which, based on the decision of the command, is not transferred to the disposal of field or reserve military units, is automatically transferred to the jurisdiction police. In this case, the signing of a formal warning is not required."

Actually, on the basis of this decision, immediately after the German attack on Poland, 160-180 soldiers from the disbanded "special units" were loaded onto transports and sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The surviving documents of the local administration of the camp make it possible to find 113 SAW prisoners on October 2, 1939 in Sachsenhausen. In November, their number rose to 181. If we take into account the possible "departure" of prisoners, then their total number may be even higher.

Do not forget about the SAW-prisoners who could have been sent here in peacetime. This is indicated by the message of a certain Heinrich K., who "supervised" the former Wehrmacht military personnel in the camp: "On the eve of the start of the war, there were special units of the Wehrmacht. Soldiers who had too many disciplinary sanctions were transferred there. In a special department, they were given a probationary period and, in the event of good service, within a few months they could be restored in their unit. If there was no improvement, then they ended their service in special units. In 1938, an order was issued according to which the most stubborn and "incorrigible" soldiers were to be sent to concentration camps. The first such prisoners arrived in Sachsenhausen in 1938, where they were immediately classified as political prisoners. They wore on their robes the same triangle as

political."

The fact that in the SS system they decided to designate former employees of special units of the Wehrmacht with a red triangle, that is, as political prisoners, was most likely due to the assertion of army psychiatry about the existence of some "leftist psychopaths". But when too many CAB prisoners began to arrive, it was decided to change their external "marking", refusing to wear the traditional red triangle. The same Heinrich K. reported the following: "When the war began, it was decided to disband the special units. There were only two ways: either to get to the front, or to

concentration camp. As a result, the first transports began to arrive in Sachsenhausen in September 1939. They were placed in a special block. And the red triangle is turned upside down."

The change in the position of the red triangle can be seen as another cynical manifestation of Nazi psychiatry, since among the multitude of "political" it was now possible to identify "leftist psychopaths", "violators". An inverted red patch, which, unlike the "normal" one (top up), seemed to say that its wearer was standing on his head, led to numerous ridicule and mockery. However, the SS leadership of the Sachsenhausen camp had other ideas about the SAW prisoners. Camp warden Gary Nojoks later recalled: "In the autumn of 1939, about 250 young Germans arrived at the camp. They were called the "special unit of the Wehrmacht" (SAW), were a closed group and were located in

a separate block. The SS guards tormented them especially cruelly, emphasizing that all SAWs were fakers and cowards who betrayed their comrades fighting on the fronts... Soon all SAWs fell into isolation, in which the "interpreters of the Bible" were! and homosexuals. The working and living conditions for the SAW were created so intolerable that many of them never left the concentration camp." The working conditions of the SAW prisoners in Sachsenhausen are testified by the communist Bernhard Kandt, a former member of the Mecklenburg Landtag. After serving a three-year sentence in prison for "high treason", in September 1939 he was thrown into Sachsenhausen. Initially, he worked at the infamous Clinker Construction site: "We had to put six meters of sand on the forest floor. The forest was not cut down, which had to be done by a special army team. There were pine trees, as I remember now, which were 100-120 years old. None of them were uprooted. The prisoners were not given axes. One of the boys had to climb to the very top, tie a long rope, and below, two hundred men had to pull it. "Have taken! Have taken! Have taken!" Looking at them, the thought came to the construction of the Egyptian pyramids. The overseers (kapos) of these former employees of the Wehrmacht were two Jews: Wolf and Lachmann. From the roots of the uprooted pines, they cut down two clubs and beat this boy in turn ... So through bullying, without shovels and axes, they uprooted all the pines along with the roots! I didn't think it was possible at all."

The testimony of Gary Nodjoks and Bernhard Kandt is corroborated by the testimony of one of the surviving CAB prisoners. In October 1946, he said: "From morning to evening we were engaged in "sport" (you understand what I mean by the word "sport"). After we worked with Jews on the construction of the clinker, most of us became "Muslims". Of the 180 people, no more than half survived the winter of 1939-1940. When the winter finally passed, all CABs were isolated in unit 12."

"Isolation" was not like a "correctional company", it was just that the SS decided to isolate the most hated prisoners. Alfred Hellriegel, who, as a political-military prisoner, belonged to such a "penal company", listed these segregated groups as "Bible expositors", homosexuals, SAB prisoners, and so-called repeat political prisoners. According to Fritz Bringmann, "blocks 11,12,35,36 were in isolation. They were surrounded by a high fence. So any contacts were excluded. Comrades who were in isolation lived in the most difficult conditions. At first, the sick were taken out of the block. However, later, in order to avoid any contact, a cupboard with medicines and bandages was placed in the "penal block", and one of the prisoners was appointed as an orderly." However, worse than these difficult conditions of existence were the torments to which they were subjected by SS-Hauptscharführer Bugdall, who considered himself "responsible for the isolation."

Heinrich K.'s remark that "out of 180 people, no more than half survived the winter of 1939-1940," seems very convincing. If we talk about dry SS statistics, then in November 1939, 181 CAB prisoners remained in Sachsenhausen, in March 1940

years - 102, and in April only - 58. In June 1940, only 22 CAB prisoners were listed in the SS card index. Do not think that all of them died. The fact is that most of the SAW prisoners were sent to the Neuengamme camp. Heinrich K. recalled: "As soon as the first transport arrived, in order to head to the newly created Neuengamme camp, everyone who could stand came out of isolation - it was imperative to leave Sachsenhausen."

The fact that such a large number of SAW-detainees were able to escape from the "isolation" by transport is explained by the illegal organization of political prisoners. Gary Nojox writes about the treatment of CAB prisoners who are in "isolation": "With great difficulty, we were able to help some of them get transported to another camp." The fact is that in the spring of 1940, Neuengamme turned from an "outer" camp into an independent camp. However, the political prisoners who tried to help the young Germans could not even imagine that even more cruel customs prevailed in Neuengamme. Heinrich K. wrote: "We got out of the fire and into the frying pan!" How many SAW prisoners could survive until the end of World War II,

unknown. Heinrich K., himself from among the "special soldiers" changed several more camps: Buchenwald, Dachau, Natzweiler. Much indicates that only a few were able to survive until the collapse of the Third Reich. The death of most of the "special soldiers" who ended up in concentration camps is another convincing example of how closely the Wehrmacht and the National Socialist state were closely intertwined in an ideological and political sense. Based on the assessments, opinions and proposals of German military psychiatrists, most of whom had been on racial-biological, social-Darwinist positions since the First World War, and later without any problems supported the ideology of the people's community and the racist attitudes of the Nazis, the Wehrmacht, on the eve of the war, was ready get rid of the "ballast" in the form of "unfit for service". These soldiers, who did not fit the criteria of the army elite, were extrajudicially written off to concentration camps under the guise of "army wreckers." Moreover, this did not happen at all on the initiative of the Reichsfuehrer SS Heinrich Himmler, but on the contrary, the urge came from the Wehrmacht itself. As the East German researcher Wolfgang Kern wrote in his work "The Internal Function of the Wehrmacht": "In the autumn of 1937, in the Wehrmacht structures that dealt with "special units", the idea arose that the soldiers of these formations, "who oppose re-education", should leave the ranks of the armed forces and spend their time in workhouses. Blomberg agreed in principle with this idea. Meanwhile, the internal department of the General Directorate of the Wehrmacht went even further. On October 14, 1937, Blomberg was advised to reject this project, "because the education of such people would be more successful in a concentration camp."

Blomberg agreed with this proposal. Probably, the point of view of German military psychiatry played an important role in making this decision. In any case, Otto Wuth (at that time a "consultant psychiatrist for the army health inspector") in his article "Workhouse or Concentration Camp" spoke in favor of the latter. In this work, he came to the conclusion that "placement in a concentration camp would be the most appropriate solution, since those who were able to correct themselves would undergo ideological education, and the incorrigible would be under the constant supervision of the authorities."

Only a few months after the attack on Poland, and with it the dissolution of the pre-war "special units", the Wehrmacht command decided to re-create these penal units as part of the reserve army. They arose on the following six bridgeheads: Shtablak, Wandern, Altengrabow, Schwarzeborn, Grafenwehr, the "protectorate" and Dellersheim. The task of these "special units" of the reserve army was as follows: "Riding the reserve units from difficult-to-educate

employees." And at the same time, "recruits should not fall into special units of the reserve army."

The cited instruction is the reason why the number of military "special units" soon began to decrease again. The chief field doctor, Dr. Wut, gave the following reason for this process: "Special units were disbanded at the beginning of the war, but then reappeared. But it seems that this fact was not known either to the doctors of the corresponding military units, or to the officers of the sanitary and psychiatric departments of military hospitals. No one consulted with them, as the officers complained, because they did not know how to deal with stubborn, asocial, excitable soldiers and violators. In the end, according to Wut, by the spring of 1940, there were only 200 people in the new "special units". As a result, part of the "special units" was simply disbanded due to its uselessness. A similar development of events could be facilitated by the tightening of military jurisprudence, which was observed at the beginning of World War II. And this, in turn, led to the fact that for any wrongdoing it was possible to fall under the tribunal. Military courts began to act much faster, and the execution of sentences in the Wehrmacht was put on stream. According to the summary report of Georg Tesin, "Parts and subdivisions of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS", in January 1940, only four "special units" remained in the reserve army.

In the Navy, starting from October 1939, a "special unit Vostok (Baltic Sea)" operated, located in the vicinity of Danzig. This unit is also known as the Hela Special Military Unit. In the Luftwaffe, according to the order of January 30

In 1940, on the site of the "Special Unit 7 1" disbanded at the beginning of the war, the "Luftwaffe Test Camp" was formed in Leipzig.

The basis for the creation of "special units", as in peacetime, were taken "Regulations for special units of the Wehrmacht". But they were substantially supplemented by the Decree adopted on December 7, 1939 "On the internal order in the special units of the reserve army." Service in special units became extremely strict.

Meanwhile, the command of the Wehrmacht decided to finally get rid of the "carrot", leaving only the "stick". In the new "Instructions for managing special units of the reserve army", this was expressed in the following maxims: "The composition of special units should be informed that transfer to a special unit is their last chance to form the right views on life and soldier's duty. After a three-month trial and re-education, the servicemen must be returned to the ranks of the active units in order to continue to fulfill their duties to protect the Fatherland, as it should be for normal soldiers. If this goal is not achieved within the specified time, then these renegades are expelled from the people's community and sent to a concentration camp ... Separately, it must be explained that desertion and other shameful phenomena will be punished by death. Service, which in a special unit should be education and hard physical labor, should be less than 10-14 hours a day. Handling a machine gun and throwing grenades is prohibited. After finishing work, employees must take their place in the barracks. They don't get holidays. With commendable behavior, they can get a leave of absence ... Employees of special units receive rations in the amount of 80% of the usual food supply, they should receive 650 grams of bread a day.

The impact of this harsh disciplinary regime could be felt, among others, by Robert Stein, who on September 3, 1940 was drafted into the Wehrmacht. Due to "political unreliability in civilian life" on September 7, 1940, he was sent to the "special unit IX", which was located in Schwarzenborn. He recalled: "Well, I got what I expected. I was badly beaten and arrested. It is customary to say about such actions that they took place "under the cover of night." In Schwarzenborn I saw a wild

terrain. There was nothing there, not even mail. I was dressed, like 300 or 400 people who were there, in the Czech uniform. There, even the carbines were Czech. Cultivating discipline, we were driven around the parade ground from morning to evening. Behind him was a backpack with a pood of stones. When the drill ended, we fell down from fatigue.

The testimony of this penal corrects the point of view of Georg Tesin, who claimed that all the "special units" of the reserve army were liquidated in May 1942. This was not true. The Berlin "Bureau of Information on the Dead Soldiers of the Wehrmacht and Captives" kept a file of "special units", from which it follows that many "special units" continued to exist until the end of 1942, and "special unit IX" operated in Schwarzenborn almost until late March 1945. The position of the historian Franz Seidler, who wrote in his work "Military Justice in the German Wehrmacht", wrote: "During the war, no one from the special units of the reserve army was handed over to the police." In fact, the "special units of the reserve army" willingly resorted to this opportunity, but in February 1942 it became the privilege of the "special field battalions".

A special field battalion was formed on August 24, 1941. It included three special field units, which were created on February 1, 1940 as an addition to the "special units" of the reserve army. These field units could include both "graduates" of the reserve units who proved their suitability for the army, and those front-line soldiers who committed minor offenses - they did not fall under the tribunal, but still had to undergo a "re-education course".

Service in a special field battalion, which was considered both a penal and educational institution, was even more difficult than service in the "special units" of the reserve army. From October 1941, a special field battalion was transferred to the Eastern Front. Employees of a special field battalion had to be involved "in hard physical labor and strict army education in the frontline zone, as close as possible to the warring troops, which should have been a dangerous circumstance."

Labor was a must. On weekdays it was necessary to work at least 10 hours, on Sunday - at least 4 hours. Moreover, it was not just about hard work, but about dangerous and hard work: demining, building dugouts, burying bodies.

In this case, the service in a special field battalion fully corresponded to what the German military psychiatrists offered. We may recall that Dr. Simon, in referring to "psychopaths", expounded on the point of "reducing the danger from them in labor units." Dr. Weiler in January 1940 presented a much clearer picture of the use of "special field soldiers": "Since the military unit must be exempt from such elements, they must be placed in special units. In them, they must perform military service under enemy fire, under a strict disciplinary regime, with rations only sufficient to maintain vital functions, and other dangers of war. Their fate will restrain the impulses of others who will try to interfere with military service. While most army psychiatrists speculated about the use of "psychopaths", the military leadership took a completely different path. The term of stay in a special field battalion should be limited to 4 months ("as a rule, 4 months"). The maximum term of service in a special battalion was not to exceed six months. After 6 months, the employee had an alternative: either return to the active unit, or transfer to the police as incapable of improvement, that is, sending to a concentration camp. Looking ahead, we can say that in the period from 1938 to 1944, about a thousand soldiers were sent to concentration camps from the Wehrmacht. At least two-thirds arrived in the camps from special units and a special battalion.

#### Chapter 4

##### Field detention units and penal field camps

On October 10, 1941, the Völkische Beobachter (People's Observer) came out with an editorial bearing a huge headline: "The hour has struck: the campaign in the East is a foregone conclusion!" It took two whole months to finally admit in December 1941 that despite the huge losses, the goal of the German strategists - the fleeting defeat of the Red Army - had not been achieved. Ahead was winter, for which the Wehrmacht was not ready. The scale of the error, which was replicated by the People's Observer, is shown in the diary of Colonel General Halder. On December 9, 1941, the Chief of the General Staff of the Land Army made the following entry: "Conversation with Field Marshal von Bock: Guderian reports that the state of military units is so critical that he does not know how to further repel enemy attacks. The most serious "crisis of confidence" in parts. The combat ability of the infantry is falling! In the deep rear, all available forces are gathering ... The army group is in dire need of people!

If in November 1941 the German units on the Eastern Front lacked 340 thousand people, then after the successful Soviet counter-offensive near Moscow, the "personnel shortage" was already 625 thousand people. The high losses that were planned by the Wehrmacht command only for the first summer months of the "Eastern campaign" were somehow compensated only by the spring of 1942. But it was not possible to fully equip the army either with the help of "combing actions", or with the introduction of the institute of staff assistants in January 1942, or with the help of other measures. Most of the German defeats were accompanied by massive frostbite, since the Wehrmacht, as part of the blitzkrieg strategy, was not prepared to conduct combat operations in a harsh winter. Finally, the leadership of the Wehrmacht was forced to start mobilizing youth born in 1923, although this was planned to be done only a year later. In an analytical note

"Combat efficiency of the Wehrmacht at the beginning of 1942", prepared in June 1942 for the General Staff, reported the following: "Without the mobilization of youth born in 1923, there is no way to compensate for the unforeseen high losses incurred during the summer campaign."

In this situation, it was necessary to change the system of execution of punishments that previously existed in the Wehrmacht, and to draft into the army those who until recently were considered "unworthy of military service." On April 2, 1942, Adolf Hitler gave the order: "The system of execution of punishments in the conditions of war must immediately adapt to the situation on the fronts. This should include interventions that, among others, have proved to be effective. Expiation of guilt should henceforth be widely used on the Eastern Front... However, some of the convicts in the future may not, at least not immediately, become part of the fighting regular units. The incentive should be the tightening of order and the differentiation of serving sentences for elements who want to leave the front through punishment. To this end, it is necessary to immediately identify the prisoners who must be sent to the frontline zone, if possible, to the combat zone, so that they do hard work in the most life-threatening conditions.

To implement this order, at first three field arrest units (FGA) were created. Their formation, according to the order of the Wehrmacht High Command of April 14, 1942, took place in military prisons: Glatz, Gernersheim and Anklam. At first they numbered about 200 people. It is noteworthy that specially selected prisoners were brought from many prisons and camps, including Fort Torgau, Bruchsal, Freiburg, Graudenz, etc. To select suitable candidates, an instruction was prepared that said:

"To serve the sentence in the field prison units (FGA), the following are taken into account: prisoners of the Wehrmacht, categories KU, 9 \ E, dun (respectively fit for combat

service, to field conditions, to service in the garrison) with the exception of those who, under the imaginary mask of atonement, will try to avoid execution of punishment - namely, malingerers, deserters, who repeatedly arbitrarily left the unit, convicted of undermining combat capability. On a special negative record were those who had already been repeatedly punished for running away. In June 1942, the circle of potential employees was replenished with those who had terms of imprisonment of no more than three months. The service in the field prison units was to be carried out by those whose "expiation at the front" seemed impossible or untimely to the command.

Simultaneously with the appearance of field convict units, field penal camps were created.

Already on April 13, 1942, an order came to the Wehrmacht prison in Fort Torgau to form penal field camps (FSL) I and P, which were intended for German troops in Northern Norway and Lapland. In all prisons of the Wehrmacht, another "inventory" was to be carried out. Everyone was supposed to be sent to the camps, except for those who were provided with relief and transfer to the active part for good behavior, and their opposite, that is, those who were sent to a concentration camp (handed over to the police). Accordingly, each of the camps was to consist of 600 prisoners. The guards and watch personnel in each camp should have numbered somewhere around 285 people. So the ratio of "guards" and prisoners was somewhere around 1:2.

The conditions in the field detention units and penal camps were virtually the same: the already familiar hard work in the dangerous frontline zone - mine clearance, the construction of bunkers and dugouts, etc. increase in the working day. In the field units, the prisoners had to work at least 10 hours, in the penal camps - at least 12 hours. With all this, field prisoners were officially entitled to the worst allowance in the Wehrmacht, which was designated by the letter  $\ddot{y}$  2, which was 20% of the usual soldier's ration. Heads of penal camps and field units, according to 8 13 of the Military Order of Departure



punishments, could act as military judges. Watch personnel in both institutions had the same rights and obligations: "At the slightest resistance, incitement or attempt to escape, authorized personnel are obliged to use weapons to kill. No warning call required. In order to prevent attempts to escape in the barracks, on the way to work and at the workplace, certain zones are created, upon entering which the fire is immediately fired to kill. It was arbitrariness, which unleashed the hands of the guards and escorts. In fact, no one paid attention to the prescription that "the warden should not abuse his power and official position". This manifested itself already during the transportation of prisoners from Fort Torgau to Norway. In the inquiries of the Bavarian Land Criminal Investigation, the following was stated: "Penalmen had to go over 500 kilometers along the coast of the Arctic Ocean, moving their luggage on their own. They marched, as a rule, at night. For the most part, the prisoners were exhausted already in the first third of the way, but in order to maintain discipline on the march, they were driven with batons or rifle butts ... According to testimonies, a prisoner who fell to the ground due to hunger or illness received an order to get up and move on. If the prisoner did not respond to the command, then it was repeated twice more by the escort. If this time there was no reaction, then the prisoner was shot on the spot, as he refused to obey the order ... the number of those shot during the march along the coast of the Arctic Ocean fluctuated between 30 and 50. column, and therefore the witnesses knew only what was happening in their column ... The witnesses testified that the prisoners did not receive from

employees of the Wehrmacht no bread, no cigarettes. Occasionally, cigarettes and bread were thrown to the ground from passing trucks. However, anyone who failed to pick them up was immediately shot for trying to escape."

The attitude towards the prisoners did not change even when they arrived at their destination in Kirkenes and Petsamo. Persecuted as "military pests, carriers of a hostile spirit" or also as "weak people whose weakness cannot be re-educated, but only eliminated with the help of punishment", they were subjected to all kinds of bullying. "According to testimonies, the guards and guards had their hands completely untied, their ruthlessness knew no bounds. For far-fetched reasons, the prisoners were beaten or shot. The behavior of individual officers and guards bordered on sadism. One such example was described by the magazine Der Spiegel in 1951: "In the camp, I heard how one of the penal soldiers was ordered to raise the trunk of a tree. But he was too weak for that. The lieutenant approached him and repeated his order three more times. The penal again and again tried to move the fallen tree, but to no avail. In the end, he was shot in the head."

In order to hide such murders, the overseers of the field penal camps had special forms at their disposal, in which only the names of the victims were entered. This form contained the following information: "Such and such a prisoner was guilty of an extraordinary disciplinary violation, for which he was executed. Buried in a certain cemetery. Death notices and obituaries are prohibited."

On August 1, 1942, the third penal camp was established. And at the end of 1942, the field penal camps were moved from the coast of the Arctic Ocean directly to the Eastern Front. Meanwhile, in Fort Torgau, new transports with penalty boxes were being prepared for dispatch. Werner Krauss, a member of the "Red Chapel", who was in the fort as a dangerous criminal, was familiar with the life of the penalty box. In this regard, he remarked: "The treatment of the penalty box was worse than ever. They were systematically exhausted by hunger and beatings. When returning from Finland, such a camp lost almost 75% of the prisoners along the way.

During the first period of activity of the penal field camp P (May-December 1942), a more accurate picture of the losses was drawn up. This issue was covered by various documents, including a medical report. The senior staff doctor Taucher, who spent two days conducting an inspection, wrote on December 23, 1942: "The overall impression was depressingly bad. This was especially true for people who had not worked for a good 4 weeks, but remained in the train in Reval ... Knowing the instructions for the penal camps, not

I expected to find obesity among the prisoners, but the degree of exhaustion is unpleasantly striking ... A large number of prisoners complain of shortness of breath, fainting when lifting and bending over, and heart pain. These complaints are the result of dystrophy. Examination showed that almost everyone had very low blood pressure and a slow pulse. The work of the heart was very slow, the sounds of the beating were muffled, weak. The complexion is gray and pale. We must think about the fact that among the prisoners there are many young people who need food much more than the elderly ... Many prisoners suffer from frostbite of the toes of the second and third degree.

If other sources are involved, it becomes obvious that of the 600 prisoners of the penal camp II, who in May 1942 were sent in the direction of the Arctic Circle from the Wehrmacht prison Torgau-Bruckenkopfin, at least a fifth died of cold and hunger by winter. According to some reports, every third. By the way, according to the examination of Dr. Taucher, out of 400 prisoners, only 82 people were in normal shape, and their health condition allowed them to work. Similar proportions also existed in the penal camps G and S. At the same time, everything indicates that during this period in the field penal camps of the Wehrmacht, a practice was applied that was called "destruction by labor" in concentration camps. When military judge Fritz Hodes, as a regular contributor to the Journal

military law" already in 1940 called the field penal camps "Wehrmacht concentration camps", then this characteristic was confirmed in practice.

At the end of 1942, several changes were made to the system of field penal camps. At first, these changes were in connection with the recognition of the fact that the rapid pace of "destruction by labor" (as was seen in the example of the field penal camp II) was, after all, ineffective, if only from a military point of view. Exhausted prisoners could not give any significant result. But, besides this, they had to be protected and at least nominally supplied with food. As a result, on January 6, 1943, a letter was received by the High Command of the Ground Forces, stating: "In the circumstances, such penal camps do not bring any benefit, but are only a burden. For this reason, the army group asks to abandon the practice of sending the offenders to the field penal camps of Guy P.

In order not to jeopardize the planned military construction projects, it was decided to "bring Camp P to operational readiness as soon as possible." It was planned to do this by means of the fact that the use of penalty boxes was supposed: a) only in the combat zone; b) when the state of health of prisoners will be maintained at the required level. However, these changes were as minor as the increase at the end of 1942 of food rations for concentration camp prisoners. The "improvement" of food in concentration camps was supposedly supposed to increase the working capacity of prisoners.

However, at the end of 1942, there was one fundamental change, which concerned all three field penal camps. Until that moment, the leadership of the Wehrmacht adhered to the position: "Those who ended up in a penal camp, in principle, had to stay there for the entire duration of the war. Only in exceptional cases could a stay in a penal camp be replaced by being sent to the front, so that the prisoner would atone for his guilt there.

However, in October 1942, it was decided that the stay in the field penal camp should have lasted from 6 to 9 months. The reduction in the terms of prison work was dictated by the lack of soldiers in the Wehrmacht. They tried to find reserves, including at the expense of prisoners from field penal camps. At the level of verbal definitions, this situation looked completely ridiculous. "Difficult to educate" and "absolutely incorrigible" overnight turned into "ill-bred" and "incorrigible".

From now on, after 6-9 months of stay in the penal camp, the prisoner had to be checked for a possible continuation of his "test" in the field prison unit. With appropriate verification, the addresser could be sent from the FGA to the front for "atonement". However, if after the expiration of the allotted months the prisoner did not show signs of "correction", then

according to the "good tradition", he was handed over to the police and he had to continue his "re-education" in a concentration camp. It is worth noting that the field penal camps, along with the partially disbanded "special units", became the second military instance, from where it was possible, on completely "legal" grounds, to get into a concentration camp.

It remains only to note that even in such a "liberal" situation, the field penal camp still continued to be a "Wehrmacht concentration camp." Nothing has changed in the relations between prisoners and overseers. Among other things, this clearly shows the message of Robert Stein. Robert Stein was a principled opponent of the National Socialist regime. For unauthorized excommunication from the unit, he was sentenced to a year in prison. But the prison was replaced with a field penal camp. There he stayed until September 1, 1943, and then ended up in a concentration camp. He recalled the following about the use of penal boxes on the Eastern Front: "Directly at the front, we were engaged in demining territories and sapper work on Lake Ilmen ... Our penal camp was completely cut off from the outside world.

It was surrounded by a tall fence with barbed wire. Our dwellings were dugouts with wooden flooring. They were round, absurd buildings that were half buried in the ground. We were under constant surveillance. When we were led to work, we were accompanied by two guards. During demining, a sapper was assigned to us. We only dug mines, and it was he who neutralized them. We did everything under escort: loaded defused mines, buried bodies, dug trenches, laid roads. The front-line soldiers saw us, we aroused pity in them, because they understood what was happening: the only appeal to us was a blow with a butt, an invariable blow with a butt. Approximately 90% of the prisoners from our penal camp died. It was in the frontline zone, we came under fire. But some died of starvation and beatings. At our own peril and risk, we got out of the camp to pick mushrooms. Each of these sorties could end in execution. From food we had only potatoes, which we ate right with the peel. It was a formal death camp. Having moved a few meters away from him, we became deserters. Caught poor fellows were hanged for intimidation. They hung in ridiculous uniforms without insignia, since they were no longer soldiers of the Wehrmacht. But even more people died from mines."

The nature of the concentration camp, which was inherent in the FSL, was indicated by the documents of the first half of 1943, which cited the causes of death of the prisoners. The most popular counts were: "shot while trying to escape" or "died of general exhaustion." How strong the hunger was, let us feel the following indications of the causes of death: "paralysis of the heart after poisoning with mushrooms"; "infectious enteritis" and T: d;

The parallel between the penal and concentration camps becomes quite obvious, if we take into account the information of 1943 about two cases of "carrying out the death sentence in the most shameful way," namely, "by hanging before the general formation of prisoners." An event that occurred in 1944 points to a similar relationship. Werner Krauss, who at that time was a prisoner of Fort Torgau, spoke about him: "Among us in the hospital was a man who was in one of these camps. His face was deeply cut. He was too frightened to admit to the doctor that these were traces of torture. He answered all questions that he was injured in an accident.

The changes outlined above in the camp system and the change in their functional tasks were to some extent due to the fact that at the beginning of 1943 the field penal camp III was transformed into a field prisoner unit, which received the number 19.

Despite the transformation that had taken place, the "traditions of the concentration camp" proved to be too tenacious in this unit. This is evidenced by the testimony of Peter Schilling, who at the end of 1944 saw the execution of 19 "deserters" from FGA-19. "On arrival, the FGA commander succinctly told me that in his unit I would not have to count on a long life. The murder of 19 prisoners was the most common thing there. I remember how the overseer gave the order to one of our comrades in misfortune to bring a leaflet that had fallen out of

propaganda bomb. The leaflet lay behind the line, which we were not allowed to cross under pain of death. When the prisoner refused, the guard threatened to shoot him for refusing to follow orders. When the prisoner nevertheless stepped behind the leaflet across the dividing line, he was shot in the back. He was killed "while trying to escape." Things like this happened almost daily. And to all this, the ration was so meager that one could simply die of hunger.

Peter Schilling's report brings us to the question of the structure of the field prison units, which numbered 12 at the end of 1942 and reached 20 in 1943. Initially, each of them was divided into a headquarters and 5 or 6 "prisoner companies". In each of the "companies" there was an "internal (statutory) composition, which had a much better allowance than the prisoners. If we take the 5th "prisoner company" FGA-19 as an example, then in June 1943 it consisted of one officer, 17 non-commissioned officers, 33 full-time employees and 166 prisoners.

In general, the ratio of "staff" and prisoners was 1:3. All the above information about the life and customs that prevailed in the penal camps can be fully attributed to the field prison units. However, not everything was the same everywhere. Werner Krauss already during his stay at Fort Torgau came to the conclusion: "The treatment there was very different; in some cases, people starved to death, and if someone fell during work, then after a fleeting "trial" he was sentenced to death. The prisoner was hanged or shot almost immediately after the verdict was passed.

The conditions of life in the FGA were mentioned in a report dated December 2, 1942, which was addressed to the command of the 1st Army Corps. This document related to the FGA, which was assigned to Army Group North between April 1 and November 30, 1942. The report stated: "Unsatisfactory accommodation, food, uniforms, lack of normal hygiene and disgusting working conditions in the combat zone cause fair complaints from the prisoners. Only about 20% of the unit was in some semblance of a normal appearance. The rest were so exhausted that they simply could not successfully cope with the assigned tasks. They can only lie on beds or stay in infirmaries. Here there is a constant threat of the emergence of a hotbed of epidemics that can threaten the entire military unit. A proposal to improve nutrition was submitted to the command of the 18th Army. By order of the commander of the 18th Army, the food ration was immediately increased.

Wolf Gerlach showed what "improvements" in living conditions in the FGA meant in practice. As a 24-year-old youth, he was sentenced to two years in prison for "undermining the combat capability of the Wehrmacht." The imprisonment was replaced by his service in FGA-6. He wrote about the events of 1943-1944: "The FGA were correctional units in the structure of the battalion. Those, in turn, were divided into companies, platoons and squads. An armed guard accounted for every 10-15 prisoners. In addition, there were special security structures, so that the escape from the FGA was very rare, in isolated cases. The tasks that were set before the FGA were very diverse. They were all risky, so we were called the "suicide team" (in the original German - "ascension team"). As a rule, we cleared the fields and built fortifications in front of our positions. In the neutral zone, we, unarmed, often came under our own and Russian fire. Such was our fate: the hardest physical labor, exhaustion from hunger, death during shelling, torture and execution if you could not work. In the event of death, the unfortunate parents were informed that their son had died of "circulatory failure". It is impossible to describe the subtleties of torment and the details of our suffering. It was hell."

We find a similar story in FGA-17 prisoner, "deserter" Karl Bauman: "From Anklam?! I arrived here. In 1942 I became a prisoner of FGA-17. Our battalion was sent to Stalingrad, to the area of Sukhaya Balka near the Donets. In the area under fire, we had to bury soldiers, clear mines and pull out the wounded. At our disposal were only arms and legs, sometimes a quick-witted head. The sapper teams moved after us. The guards mostly got drunk and took out their rage and fear on us. If in a day we pulled out

insufficient number of trenches, we were mercilessly beaten with rifle butts. I myself got a couple of times with a thick club ... At the front, it often happened that marauders were shot. Our people often stole bread. We constantly wanted to eat, but there was no food. Meanwhile, on the battlefield lay decaying Germans and Russians, in whose field bags bread was missing. Sometimes we managed to catch it. It tasted like dead meat. Not everyone survived. Many developed dysentery.

The supply was so bad that sometimes you had to drink your own urine."

Thomas Krytsanyak almost died in FGA-10, where he was serving a sentence in 1943 for "arbitrarily leaving a unit." "Our tents were located in the garden. The staff sergeant once threw: "Pick an apple and you're dead!" One morning my friend noticed that

there is an apple on the ground. He bent down and picked it up. Only then did he discover that it was rotten. He threw it back. The staff sergeant noticed this. He took the gun, reloaded it and said: "Do you know that I can shoot you?" The friend wanted to say something, but a shot rang out.

Such murders were covered by formal instructions that "all violators of the order must be treated with all severity, and, if necessary, without hesitation to use weapons." In fact, from all the surviving documents, it was evidence that there was a famine in the FGA, that the prisoners, driven to despair, tried to protest or even flee. All of them were waiting for death. This explains the surprisingly large number of executions in the field prison units. It is obvious that there was a direct connection between these three phenomena (hunger-escape-execution). Nevertheless, the terrible examples from the practice of FGA-6, 10 and 17 cannot be transferred to all units of prisoners. This follows at least from the message of Joachim T., who during 1943 served a one-year sentence in FGA-14. From his memoirs it follows that mainly his work was reduced to felling trees, digging anti-tank ditches, building bunkers and dugouts. Sometimes he came under fire. After a few months of "testing by the front", he was returned to the active part. There it was discovered that he was suffering from dropsy, a consequence of malnutrition. He was demobilized. Looking back, Joachim T. recalls the attitude towards him in FGA-14. "If we take into account the war, then it was quite humane. Maybe it was the merit of the commander of the chief sergeant major, in the past managing the estate. He was a very decent person. He never quibbled unnecessarily." However, such "humanism" in the Wehrmacht was assessed as a "negative phenomenon." So, for example, General Eugen Müller, head of the department for the activities of military justice agencies under the High Command of the Ground Forces, somehow appeared in the command of the third tank army in order to form a general impression of the Wehrmacht's penal units. In conversation, he threw: "Nine is fine. And at fourteen, the regime is not tough enough.

Indeed, in a number of units, officers and non-commissioned officers took care to create tolerable living conditions for the prisoners. The reasons for "care" could lie both in personal characteristics and in purely military tasks. So, for example, during the visit of the military judge Colonel Tom to FGA-7, his commander, Major Knobloch, was reproached: "Your penal unit is more like a summer country boarding house, where they sometimes work." Major Knobloch plucked up the courage to reject the accusation as fundamentally untrue: "A prisoner from the ranks of the Wehrmacht must certainly maintain his physical form." But such attitudes were by no means characteristic of all FGA commanders.

Let's try to answer the question: to what extent did the FGA and the FSL correspond to the concentration camps? It should be noted that the personnel of the FGA did not show such blatant contempt for human life, as did the SS in concentration camps and escorts in penal camps. Let me quote Franz Seidler: "Life in the field prison units was much more tolerable than in the penal camps." At the same time, an important role was played by the fact that in the FGA, which were considered military units, the prisoners did not experience such contempt as the prisoners of the penal camps, who

was sentenced as "war saboteurs". If in the FGA, from the point of view of the Nazis, there were "violators" who had to atone for their guilt, then in the camps there were "traitors" who had to be "eliminated" as far as possible. Using the jargon of those times, we can say that "enemies of the people's community" were sent to the camps.

So, in part, the parallels between the field detention units and the penal camps, as the alleged "Wehrmacht concentration camps",

justified. However, a clear answer has not yet been given to the question of the effectiveness of field detention units from a military point of view. Also interesting is the level of general prevention and prevention of disciplinary violations. Available\* sources and documents show a completely contradictory picture. Let's take a few snippets. A report from FGA-3 dated August 1, 1942 on military effectiveness stated the following: "During July, all four available companies of 120 people were almost at the very front. They were engaged in the only work, which consisted in the fact that they erected some semblance of a gati for the 218th Infantry Division. Actually, the job was to saw off the trunks of trees, and then carry them to the road. This was done because there was swampy soil everywhere. During a working week of seven days, these 120 men sawed off and laid from 7331 to 9527 logs, which approximately corresponds to 5 kilometers of gati. Since the work was carried out in swamps, swamps or in areas with soft clay, the trunks had to be delivered from the forest. I must say that the work of the prisoners was very productive. Separately, I would like to single out 16 people from the demining group. Injury and death from explosions became almost a natural thing in it. However, all treated areas turned out to be absolutely MINE-CLEAR."

The military effectiveness of the FGA is also indicated by the fact that at the end of 1942 it was possible to encounter cases of arming individual field convict units. However, the number of armed prisoners was small. The memo of the Supreme Command of the Ground Forces dated October 20, 1942 stated: "In exceptional cases, units can arm themselves to carry out assigned tasks. Prisoners can get weapons in their hands only under the supervision of authorized personnel. The weapon in this case was intended only to repel enemy attacks. Or, for example, on January 27, 1943, the command of the 18th Army issued an order that FGA-4 and 6 should have at least one armed platoon. Depending on the results of this experiment, provide for the possibility of expanding the armed unit to the size of a company.

Such a development of events seems quite possible. Especially if you take into account the heavy defensive battles fought by the Wehrmacht in August 1944. In the "History of the 24th Infantry Division" there is a mention of "armed prisoners": "The armed company of this unit turned out to be very reliable."

Fort Torgau made a completely different impression on Werner Krauss: "The secret reports on the FGA, which I managed to read in the office, were dominated by complaints that the maintenance of prisoners is only a waste of provisions, that, from a military point of view, they are of no use. This was due to the defeatist mood that prevailed among the prisoners. It was said that all field convict units, including authorized personnel, were only thinking about how to go over to the side of the enemy, which was already the case with FGA-19. There were many FGA prisoners in the fort who were captured while trying to cross the front line. Another, no less contradictory evidence is given in a series of articles by Horst Voight, which are devoted to "Special Units and Testing at the Front": "Among other things, the field prisoner unit 19 repeatedly received encouragement and gratitude from the division command during heavy defensive battles in Northern Russia and the Baltics".

The "History of the 30th Infantry Division" spoke of the combat use of the FGA in the spring of 1944: "The use of prisoners in our division is depressing. There are many degraded ranks among the prisoners. Now here they have to carry out work on clearing the territory in the immediate vicinity of the front line. In particular, they are provided with mountains of decaying

bodies of those who fell in previous battles. They do their work in silence. They are silent, even if there is an opportunity to talk - conversation with prisoners is prohibited. Their

the guards are very cruel, although, on the other hand, they get excited when they have to go to the front line.

While in most materials there is an opinion about the general preventive use of PHA, some eyewitnesses deny such a possibility. So, for example, officer Karl Siegfried Bader testified that the prisoners were not even given special warnings: "No one was scared when they found out that they were going to be sent to the battlefield without weapons. But they knew that without weapons, a soldier's life is not worth a penny. They knew that a disarmed unit in a real danger, for obvious reasons, would not be able to repulse the enemy. For this reason, Bader spoke of the "failure of the idea of \u200b\u200bcreating the FGA", although these units continued to exist until the very end of the war. For him, "the field execution of punishment was the biggest failure." At the same time, he specifically indicates that he personally was not familiar with the "field execution", but he allows himself to emphasize: "What I am reporting is the unanimous opinion of many people who served as officers in prisoner teams, and therefore had the opportunity to personally observe . These observations were confirmed by numerous FGA prisoners. In his opinion, unarmed service on the front line was practically impossible. "Not a single division commander could be happy with the presence in his unit of a unit consisting of unreliable people. To be honest, no one would have made a military unit out of them. Even if from time to time they could provide some work services, they were still very limited. During the retreat, which began after Stalingrad, and ended with the collapse of the Eastern Front, each time it turned out that the FGA did not help anyone, but only got in the way. Repeatedly they were simply left where they were based. The commander of the FGA had to think for himself how to break through to the front line. The fact that things were exactly like this is evidenced by the fact of the disappearance of several FGAs without a trace, which, in the confusion of the retreat, apparently could not break through on their own without weapons. The unarmed men on the front line were too much of a burden. Think for yourself: could unreliable soldiers, dissatisfied with the service, provisions, and mistreatment, be on the front lines? The danger of going over to the side of the enemy was so great that the use of the FGA was more in the hands of the enemy, and not of the Wehrmacht's own unit! In fact, numerous prisoners spread to the enemy camp, voluntarily or involuntarily giving the enemy information about the mood on the front line, thereby helping him.

The difference in assessments and statements regarding the FGA is most likely due to the fact that different conditions existed in various field detainee units. The same applies to the prisons of the Wehrmacht. In the future, we will proceed from the fact that the nature of the FGA changed throughout the war. There was some differentiation within the field convict units themselves. It was determined by the so-called "promotion opportunities". As we have seen, the FGA sometimes had an "armed platoon". There are references to "rapid reaction platoons". Apparently, this was the first stage of the "test". In addition, there were "opportunities for falling" in the FGA, which were expressed in disciplinary sanctions (deprivation of food, arrest), as well as in transfer to penal camps.

In addition, it is necessary to answer the question: how did the FGA suffer huge losses? Was it the result of enemy shelling or the result of capturing prisoners? Desertion, death sentences, executions while trying to escape, death from starvation and disease, which was inherent in many penal units, should not be discounted. In addition to everything, one must take into account the order of the Führer, issued in April 1942. It was he who became the starting point of the "field execution of punishments." Thanks to this order, the overcrowded prisons of the Wehrmacht were unloaded. From this point of view, field detention units and penal camps had mainly two goals. On the one hand, through tougher penalties and a disciplinary regime, to promote the "preservation

self-control" in parts of the Wehrmacht and intimidate "unreliable recruits." On the other hand, the emergence of new field units should have improved the situation to some extent.

armies on the Eastern Front. The use of prisoners and convicts could release sappers and engineering and construction units, which were supposed to be transferred to perform other tasks. The fact that the penal has become a significant military factor is evidenced by the following information: by October 1, 1943, there were about 27 thousand people in the penal camps, special units, field convict units and prisons of the Wehrmacht alone. The version about plugging the "holes" in the ranks of the army by the forces of the penitentiaries is confirmed by another measure taken in April 1942. We are talking about the call "unworthy of military service." Chapter 5 The Emergence of the 999th and 500th "Test Units"

Until April 1942, former prisoners, who made up the bulk of the "unworthy of military service," could be drafted into the army on only one condition. They had to write a petition for the return of their "honorary right", that is, for the restoration of their rights as "worthy of service." However, this possibility was minimal. Similar precedents could be counted on the fingers. Back in 1939, Professor Erich Schwinge, one of the authors of the comments on the military penal code, and also, perhaps, one of the most zealous fighters against "pacifist propaganda and subversive communist activities" wrote in one of the specialized army magazines: "Today, when an honorable character military service is emphasized so clearly that the idea of conscripting former prisoners even into the ranks of special units seems doubtful to me. However, two and a half years later, the situation was completely different.

And in April 1942, the Wehrmacht High Command issued an amazing circular. In it, albeit in a neat form, they still called "empty chatter and demagoguery" arguments about "worthiness to carry out military service." Separately, it was emphasized that such passages no longer had any military significance. Letters sent to each military district regarding ex-prisoners "unworthy of military service" reported the following: "Due to the expansion of the definitions, unworthy military service who have already served their prison terms or have been released on probation, without writing any petitions must be reinstated as worthy of service in order to replenish the ranks of the fighting army units ... All those sentenced to a term of not more than three years in prison are subject to this order:

a) immediately, if no special punishments and fines have been recorded (a single violation of laws, for example, preparation for treason, perjury, a crime in an institution, currency fraud) or if a conviction has been canceled, and as a result, the unworthiness of service and other consequences have been removed;

6) in case of more significant offenses and when the unworthy person spent a long time after the commission of the last crime without being punished (for example, in case of crimes against property, such as theft, fraud, embezzlement, as well as crimes against morality).

Re-military fitness is not granted to those convicted of unnatural debauchery, treason, as well as to those in relation to whom the punishment in the form of castration has been applied.

That the High Command of the Wehrmacht began by calling in those who had relatively short prison terms (up to three years) was not surprising, since the April order practically spoke of a planned "probation phase" through which a huge number had to go through "unworthy of service." New human resources were needed to wage war. It is possible that part of the army leadership

considered "preparation for high treason" as a criminal article, under which many innocent people passed. This explains why treason, like currency fraud and perjury, was regarded as the least "offensive crime for military service." Under certain circumstances, these criminals could carry out "honorary service" in the Wehrmacht. It is possible that the army officials proceeded from the fact that



many years of terror and increased propaganda did their job - anti-fascists became opportunists, indifferent to politics

One way or another, but in April 1942, the Wehrmacht command expressed the hope that it was still possible to make good soldiers from the "political prisoners", which the army so badly needed. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that "state traitors" accounted for only one third of the total number of "unworthy service" who were supposed to be recruited into the ranks of the armed forces. The Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) did not share this optimism. For this reason, the participation of the criminal police and the Gestapo was prescribed for the selection of future soldiers. At the same time, the secret police was supposed to have the right to veto when considering "political cases". Knowing the intentions of the army officials, on March 30, 1940, the leadership of the RSHA developed a special instruction specifically for the Gestapo: "There is a danger that politically unreliable individuals who were once convicted of communist, Marxist views and other anti-state activities, on their own initiative or instructions subversive organizations will try to infiltrate the ranks of the Wehrmacht. In order to stop such subversive work in a timely manner, a thorough study of the political behavior of traitors who have been released is required. When checking, it is not enough that the former prisoner, for example, "after being released from custody did not appear anywhere else" or "did not make any provocative statements." The collection of information about political behavior should begin with party functionaries, who, if possible, should add up a complete picture of the political ideas of the convict, restore his way of thinking. If it is thus concluded that he once stumbled, but atoned for his crime, he should not be denied military service. If, on the contrary, we are talking about communist or Marxist functionaries, then the most severe measures must be applied.

The fears of the employees of the Reich Security Main Office were based on information received from an informant from Nuremberg, which was transmitted in May 1941 by criminal inspector Eckerl to the Reich Ministry of Justice:

"The issue of returning the possibility of military service is currently being actively discussed in communist circles. While a small proportion of former communists are content with the status of "unworthy", as it allows them to evade service, the majority adheres to a diametrically opposite point of view. These people are trying to get into service in the Wehrmacht for the following reasons:

Germany's chances of winning are nil. In the stage of the decisive struggle, it can be expected that 90% of the former communists will again be imprisoned. Everyone knows what shines for them in this situation. You can avoid such a fate only if you get to serve in the Wehrmacht. If it comes to a military conflict between Germany and the Soviet Union, then the most stringent measures will be taken against the former communists. They will become tougher in case of low chances of the National Socialist regime to win. This takes into account the fact that "unworthy of service" will be used in the rear for various jobs, where they are more likely to die under bombs than soldiers at the front. An absolute prerequisite for the coming to power of the proletariat is the familiarity of all former communists with weapons and war tactics. It is assumed that the Communist Party would have its people in the ranks of the Wehrmacht, where they would conduct Marxist propaganda.

Most communists "unworthy of service" can mislead local groups and district committees of the NSDAP, demonstrating their loyalty. This is done in order to obtain approval of the application for reinstatement. In a number of cases, it has been established that former communist functionaries who continue their illegal activities managed to receive a positive assessment.

It is difficult to answer the question of the extent to which the fears of the RSHA were justified. However, two examples can be given. Willi Beitz reported on the discussions held by the arrested members of communist youth organizations in the mid-1930s while staying in one of the

prisons: "I belonged to a group of comrades who, in accordance with the decision of the KPD and the KMSG (Communist Youth League of Germany), held the point of view that the relevant work should have been carried out in such formations of fascist society as the Imperial Labor Service of the SA, SS, Hitler Youth, Union German girls. We could not ignore the Wehrmacht as the most important institution of the fascist state. In this connection, I also recalled that before that the KPD and the KMSG were engaged in secret activities in the Reichswehr and the police units stationed in the barracks. They secretly tried to get weapons long before the fascist dictatorship was established. I have been cooperating with these structures since 1931. In principle, nothing has changed in this activity, it has only expanded. We received a decision that the young comrades, each individually, had to apply for the restoration of the possibility of service. Our petitions were not accompanied by any political statements, as we did not want to give Nazi propaganda a pretext for abuse. However, it was possible to submit a collective statement and a corresponding confession of repentance, an assurance of loyalty to the Nazi state. But we tried to avoid it." Something similar was described by Max Emendörfer, a communist from Frankfurt-Main, who filed a petition in order to elude the control of the Gestapo. Once in the Wehrmacht, he intended to go over to the side of the Red Army. He succeeded. Max

Emendörfer continued his anti-fascist activities as one of the vice-presidents of the Free Germany National Committee.

However, the suspicions of the SS were not groundless. One important document fell into their hands, which very well illustrates the attitude of organized communists towards the "test battalions". We are talking about a letter from Ernst Thalmann, which managed to be sent to freedom. It said: "I am often asked the question: to join the Gestapo or the army? Go to a regular unit or a penal battalion? You have two possibilities that you can take into account: most likely, immediately after your release, you will be drafted into the army right from home; and the other - the Gestapo will begin to check your political beliefs. Getting into the penal battalions is very likely, since almost all political prisoners under the age of 45 go this way. For example, I heard about an army training camp for penal battalions, located in the vicinity of Lake Constance, in Heuberg, where political prisoners from all over the Reich, including from Hamburg, are trained. It's bad there, they say, there were even several executions there. However, this step will allow you not to worry, since for the most part the people with whom you find yourself in military camps will be your political comrades.

The April decree of the High Command of the Wehrmacht led to such an influx of requests for the restoration of the possibility of service that the command of the military districts was simply unable to carry out the checks prescribed by the RSHA. After that, on May 30, 1942, a circular was sent to the Gestapo, which ordered the officers of the secret police to deal with this issue on their own. To this end, in the middle of 1942, they received in their hands the "Directive on the repeated restoration of the military fitness of political convicts." In "doubtful cases", in particular, in case of suspicion of involvement in the activities of the "Black Front", as well as if "unworthy of military service" was under

lengthy police surveillance, the decision of the RSHA was required. The following extract from the directive shows how strictly the Berlin headquarters of the Gestapo treated not only the "unworthy", but also the command of the military districts:

"1) it is fundamentally necessary to distinguish convinced criminals from those who have gone astray; particularly stringent criteria must be taken as the basis for selection:

aa) criminals dangerous for the state, the army and society (terrorists, assassins, saboteurs, instigators) and recidivists;

BB) convicted for the decomposition of the Wehrmacht, SS, SA;

ss) former party functionaries, if they really continued to fulfill their duties even after coming to power[1

Re-granting fitness for military service in these cases should be a rare exception. This step requires exceptional reasons;

if we are talking about confused, politically corrupted elements (including mostly those already convicted) and those unworthy of service who have rebuilt, proved their ability to resist the enemy (or in any other way), then they should be magnanimously given an honorable duty performing military service;

2) an unconditional prerequisite for satisfying petitions is a statement of the state way of thinking.

If we are talking about paragraph 1a, then a thorough recheck of the political behavior of the object is required. The statement that the convicted person is no longer involved in politics or demonstrates loyalty is not sufficient. It is necessary to obtain clear evidence that after the release (on average, the term of imprisonment lasts three years), the subject began to adhere to National Socialist views, which should obviously follow from his current behavior. The relevant structures should find out in party instances information about membership or cooperation with the National Socialist associations, with the National Socialist Aid, the Imperial Air Defense Union. In this situation, membership in the German Labor Front is not taken into account, since the object may join this organization based on socio-economic motives, and not for political reasons. Particular attention should be paid to participating in National Socialist events: collecting donations, participating in a subscription campaign for national

socialist newspapers, etc."

Such a recheck by the Gestapo, as well as the consideration of applications in four structures (Wehrmacht, police, justice, NSDAP) significantly slowed down the process of supplying new personnel to the front. The same could be said about criminal elements, although their verification by the criminal police took much less time than the "testing" of former political prisoners by the Gestapo. Despite the issuance of the April order, the Wehrmacht has so far had to reckon with such delays.

In view of this situation, a fundamental decision was made in early September 1942. The highest ranks of the High Command of the Wehrmacht insisted on the future use of former prisoners at the front, "unworthy of service." On September 11, 1942, Chief Military Judge Scherer telephoned the Reich Ministry of Justice and said that the High Command could immediately use the former prisoners. To expedite this process, it was proposed to change the process for granting applications for re-granting fitness for service.

Obviously, the fact was taken into account that in the case of "unworthy" with minor misconduct, the command of the military districts could refuse to "investigate" other instances. Almost at the same time, military judge Westphal, in his

In a conversation, he emphasized: "The intervention of the police can be considered expedient only in cases of serious crimes, as well as anti-state actions and treason." In a hurry, army officials and representatives of the Ministry of Justice prepared a project for the creation of "Test Unit 999", which, having arisen in October 1942, was initially called the "African Brigade-999". From the very beginning, it was assumed that not only former prisoners, but also those who were still in camps and prisons could be in it. It is noteworthy that service in the brigade-999 was considered as a "test by the front", and only then the "unworthy" could be recognized as fit for service and transferred to the regular units of the Wehrmacht.

When completing the 999 units, the Wehrmacht command paid attention to the fact that they were a mixture of criminal elements, politically unreliable elements, religious dissidents and people who did not pass the racial criteria of the so-called Nuremberg Laws. The command of the 999th battalion was entrusted to reliable officers and non-commissioned officers, who were supposed not only to lead and discipline the units entrusted to them, but also to implement the tactics of indirect destruction

unwanted items.

All men deemed "unworthy of military service" received a certificate of deregistration, which, due to its bluish color, was called the "blue certificate." Its owners no longer fell under the control of the military administration.

By the time the Second World War began in Germany, there were about 300,000 opponents of the Nazi regime in prisons and camps. In total, about a million people had been in places of detention by 1939. The beginning of the war became the starting point for the intensification of internal terror. On September 3, 1939, two years after the attack on Poland, Himmler, by decree of Hitler, issues a decree "On the principles of internal state security during the war." In particular, it said: "Any attempt to undermine the cohesion and fighting spirit of the German people will be suppressed in the most severe way. In particular, any person who, in his statements, expresses doubt about the coming victory of the Reich or the competence of Germany to wage war, will be subjected to prison arrest. This definition contributed to a new wave of arrests of communists, social democrats, liberals and leaders of Christian churches. Most of them have not thought about anti-fascist activities for a long time. Many were arrested again.

As military operations unfolded and new operations were prepared, the Reich leadership tried to take measures in advance that would facilitate the mobilization of forces. In 1940, examinations of all "unfit for military service" were carried out. Similar surveys swept across Germany, annexed Austria, the annexed parts of Czechoslovakia and the territory of occupied Poland. Such checks concerned not only those who were free, but also those who were still in the camp barracks. Erwin Bartz in his memoirs described the examinations as follows: "True, they forgot to inform me of my expulsion from the Wehrmacht, but I took it for granted - the "state criminal" was not worthy to wear "the venerable military uniform handed to him by the Fuhrer" to participate in the war of conquest. I was all the more surprised when in the summer of 1940 I received an invitation for an examination. As an anti-fascist, and even a convict, I was always a little nervous. But when I received the official letter, I was absolutely calm. I was fully convinced that this letter had been sent to me by mistake. Before entering the examination center, I asked the official: "For what purpose was I called here at all?" At the same time, I showed him my only document - a certificate of release from prison. He studied the certificate hesitantly, but still said: "Come in!"

About a hundred men were gathered in the building of the Bohemian brewery. All approximately 1900-1911 years of birth. I got the feeling that I was one of the few who didn't take this visit seriously. I was standing in sweatpants by the height ruler when an excited non-commissioned officer entered. "Who is Erwin Bartz here?!" he shouted. I introduced myself. "Man, get dressed. And as soon as possible to the Oberschutz SS. I willingly

followed him.

Seeing me, the SS man was surprised and shouted: "How dare you enter? Wait in the corridor until you are called!" It seems that a special examination was intended for me. Tense minutes drag on. Suddenly it is heard: "Instrumentalist Bartz, come in!" I internally laugh at this appeal. "Prisoner" or "state criminal" would sound bad. However, it was impossible to address me as "comrade" or "sir". In the end, turning to me by profession, the SS man made a Solomonic decision. On the platform sat several officers and a man in civilian clothes, whom I easily recognized as a member of the Gestapo. Here begins a small interrogation.

The major, apparently the chief among all those present, orders:

- Come to us and stand at attention!

He rattles on:

Have you been sentenced to prison?

"Yes, Herr Major," I say as loudly as possible.

- For what?

"Preparing high treason," I echo.

— Communist!

I leave this exclamation of the officer without comment.

After that, an almost ritual action began. The major is looking attentively at those sitting in the room. Then he puts down his pencil, stands up and announces briefly, almost in a military way: "According to 8 13 of the military code, he was excluded from the ranks of the Wehrmacht."

The secretary hands me a blue piece of paper. After that, the command is given: "Free".

I try my best not to smile and say, "Thank you very much."

"So, I now had a military ID: how long will I keep it?"

The Blue Identity was kept by Bartz for about two years.

According to recent estimates, about a third of all employees of the 999th penal battalions were convicted for active anti-fascist activities. However, in some units, the proportion of anti-fascists could be much higher. But in any case, this did not change the overall picture. Anti-fascists were in the minority in relation to the criminals. When we talk about the 999th battalion, we are not talking about a cohesive and complete military unit. The 999th battalion is the general name for a wide variety of military formations, which were used in a wide variety of theaters of war during 1943-1945.

Initially, it was assumed that the 999th battalions would be used to reinforce the German-Italian group that fought in North Africa. However, it was not so easy to transfer penal units to Africa. Despite all efforts, only in the spring of 1943 some of them ended up in Tunisia, where they were transferred either by air or by sea. Here they were used mainly to cover the withdrawal of the main military units. This was the case, for example, in Kairouan. The remaining battalions were used depending on the situation at the front. The remnants of the 999th battalions remaining in Italy after the end of hostilities in North Africa were transported back to Heuberg, where they were merged into the new penal units. At the end of May 1943, the new 999th battalions

were sent to Greece, where they, along with the regular units of the Wehrmacht, were used as occupying troops.

Looking ahead, we note that in the period from the end of 1943 to the beginning of 1944, some of the 999th battalions were sent to the Eastern Front. The German military command intended to use them to defend positions on the Dnieper, but this idea failed. Most of the penalized, and not only anti-fascists, preferred to go over to the side of the Red Army. Many of them were then used for illegal work in the German rear. Fearing mass desertion, the Wehrmacht command decided to disarm the three 999th battalions and use them to build defensive structures. After the breakthrough of the Red

Armies on the Dnieper Front The 999th battalions were withdrawn from the Eastern Front and transferred to Baumholder. It was planned to hold a trial of the so-called instigators there, but then it was decided to abandon the show trial - the situation in the penal battalions was too tense. After merging into one 999th battalion, the surviving penalists were sent to Greece.

Illegal political work in the 999th battalion at first was aimed at identifying like-minded people on the anti-fascist front. Then secret meetings began to be held, information was exchanged. Members of the underground tried to influence the mood of the rest of the penalty box.

During the withdrawal of German troops from Greece and the march through Albania and Yugoslavia (autumn 1944 - spring 1945), the illegal work had to be rebuilt. The political penalists concentrated on using war weariness to provoke the surrender of all 999th battalions, if possible. However, this became possible only in the last months of the war. In the penal 999th battalions, as in no other parts of the Wehrmacht, one could find the utmost concentration of political opponents of National Socialism. Anti-fascist activities in penal units were very diverse. It extended from the activity of underground cells to cooperation with the population of the countries occupied by the Nazis. The highest point of the Resistance can be considered the transition of the German penalty box to the side of the Red Army, the partisan formations of Greece, Yugoslavia, Albania.

In the period from October 1942 to September 1944, more than 28 thousand people passed through the "test unit 999". Of these, two-thirds were former prisoners, and all the rest ended up in the 999 brigade from camps and prisons. At the same time, if you look at the articles under which the 999th were convicted, then 30% of them were "political", which were opposed by 70% of criminal elements. The authorized personnel who were responsible for the training of the 999s, for military leadership at all levels, from a company to a squad, amounted to about 8,500 people. And we are talking about specially selected officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers of the Wehrmacht (the privates who were supposed to control the penalty box were called manschafts in such units).

In order to circumvent the obstacles set by the RSHA, large numbers of the "unworthy" were drafted into a closed unit which, contrary to past experience, was not a unit of the regular army. This is clearly seen in a letter from the Wehrmacht High Command dated April 14, 1943. It was stamped "Top Secret". This secret document was addressed to the legal departments of all three parts of the Wehrmacht: the land army, the Luftwaffe, and the navy. At the same time, "for review" one copy was sent to the SD. The reason for the letter was the attempts to disband the 999 brigade, undertaken in January 1943: "The decree of January 13, 1943 so increased the conscription of "unworthy military service" that in the future we will have to face a large number of individuals convicted of anti-state activities, in particular, with former active communists. The threat that arises from so many such elements can be neutralized for a long time if

they will be in closed units, where they will be subject to appropriate supervision. However, sooner or later recognizing them as worthy of service, we give anti-state personalities the opportunity to pave the way for the regular units of the Wehrmacht, which can be harmful. For this reason, the final granting of fitness for military service to the "unworthy" who were at one time convicted of anti-state activities or who are doubtful about the National Socialist state should be made not only depending on active participation in hostilities, but also on condition of changing the way of political thinking. To check such attitudes, it is necessary to request an assessment of "unworthy service" from the police station at the permanent place of residence. The command of the Wehrmacht unit must familiarize itself with this certificate before submitting a petition to the Imperial Ministry of Justice of the "unworthy" for the re-restoration of fitness for service."

It follows from this document that the main concern of the highest ranks of the Wehrmacht and the RSHA was that active opponents of the Nazi regime could not continue their work in regular units. To prevent this danger, the parties agreed that the "unworthy of service" opponents of the National Socialist regime, together with criminals (also "unworthy of service") should be isolated in special closed formations, where they would be under constant control. Throughout their service, they had to hope for the satisfaction of petitions, for a "test by the front." This form of penal division demonstrated another facet of cooperation between the Wehrmacht and the departments of Heinrich Himmler. To some extent, the appearance of the "test unit 999" was a kind of compromise between the SS and the army ranks. For the Gestapo (by virtue of its function), the struggle against the "internal enemy" was in the first place. In this case, the secret police had an excellent opportunity to gather together many opponents of the regime, which made it easier to control them. On the other hand, the Wehrmacht could actively use potential "enemies of the people's community" and "state criminals" to fight the "external enemy".

As a result, the Gestapo determined with whole lists who should be removed from the territory of the Reich. At the same time, "conscripts" were considered "fit for military service", and the certificate of deregistration was canceled. The first employees of the 999th battalions appeared in Heuberg on October 15, 1942. By this time (as of October 6, 1942), the Wehrmacht was missing about a million people. Among the first "conscripts" were both "political" and criminals.

How the conscription took place in practice, Hans Burckhardt depicted in his memoirs: "June 4, 1943, my time has come. In March 1943, at the Berlin Sports Palace, Goebbels proclaimed total war, which required new victims to wage a war of conquest.

"Urgent. For the Wehrmacht! Free at all post offices in the Reich! - an envelope with such marks delivered me a registered letter. It was a summons to the military registration and enlistment office. I had to go through the infamous military draft. The letter read:

"According to the order of the Fuhrer, you have been given a great honor - for the duration of the war you are fit for military service. At the recruiting station, you must give the certificate of deregistration that you have in your hands. You should have food for three days with you. For military service in battalion 999 you must appear on June 7, 1943

of the year up to 20 hours 30 minutes at the address: Berlin \$I / 61, Obentrautstrasse, 2/4.

Captain (illegible signature)."

I had three days to think. Should I follow this order? I consulted with family and close friends, and then weighed the pros and cons, including

possible consequences. In the end, I decided to transfer this order to the factory. At the enterprise, they managed to save me from all calls as a worker with armor. This time it probably worked out. At the same time, by evading the last call, I violated the existing rules. Namely, the accompanying paper stated: "Whoever violates the order, referring to the employer or other civilians, will be punished in accordance with the laws of war." What happened was what I expected. The order was accepted by my direct supervisor, a former captain, who remarked, "Never mind. We will free you again!"

In essence, the situation was favorable for me. I had armor from Rheinmetall-Perfokarten, formerly a German-American concern, which reported directly to Armaments Minister Speer. In addition, in production, I held a key

job title.

Everything was going well until suddenly on June 6 in the afternoon I received a summons. All my efforts were in vain. There was an unspoken order to remove from important

posts in the production of former political prisoners. On the evening of June 7, 1943, with a suitcase in hand and food for three days, I headed for Obentrautstrasse. Everything happened very quickly there. After they shouted my name, I handed in a certificate of deregistration, turning into a soldier of the 999th battalion.

As you can see, there were no insurmountable contradictions between the SS and the Wehrmacht on this issue. Both sides were interested in the "final victory", and therefore agreed to a compromise. But in fairness, it should be noted that Himmler was somewhat suspicious of the idea of creating brigade-999. The fact is that the emergence of this "test part" deprived him of control over approximately 30 thousand people from his "classic clientele". According to the leadership of the SS, many of the "unworthy" could show dangerous resourcefulness and demonstrate "an imaginary conversion to the National Socialists."

If the reason for the forced recruitment in April 1942 was the overly high requirements for recruits in the Wehrmacht, then the formation of "test units" was dictated by somewhat different settings than the creation of the FGA and penal camps. In the spring of 1942, the National Socialist bosses faced a paradoxical situation: a huge number of "unworthy" could continue a relatively quiet life in the rear, while the true adherents of the Nazi regime were dying on the Eastern Front. Martin Bormann drew attention to this aspect in one of the party circulars. In a secret document, he informed party authorities about the creation of "special formations." "Regarding the use of unworthy military service in the Wehrmacht. The Gauleiters have repeatedly reported that the population does not understand why the unworthy of service, on the one hand, are not involved in military operations, on the other hand, they are not involved in special work. When considering this issue, we must not forget that, on the one hand, it is impossible to recruit into the army persons unworthy of service, as this undermines the prestige of the Wehrmacht. However, on the other hand, the circle of these persons cannot be ignored, as they turn into "winners from the conduct of the war." The use of the unworthy of service should take place within the framework of special formations. From the day of conscription, unworthy servicemen are considered to be enlisted in the army. However, they can be recognized as fit for military service only after special trials and hostilities at the front.

But if it were only a question of eliminating the stratum of unwitting deviationists that suddenly appeared, then the National Socialist regime would undoubtedly have at its disposal other possibilities for solving this problem. They could be dressed in an "honorary gray uniform" and sent to serve their labor service in the "Organization Todt" (OT), where many dangerous jobs would be found for the "unworthy". This is just one of the possible options. But one of the true reasons for the drafting of "criminals" and "enemies of the state"

was rooted in the racist ideology of the National Socialist state. This motive becomes clear if we take into account the words of Hitler, uttered on August 20, 1942, when the new leadership of the Reich Ministry of Justice was sworn in: "The judge is the bearer of the spirit of national self-preservation. Every war leads to negative selection. Positive selection is dying. But the choice of a dangerous military path is already a selection. The daredevils will be pilots, they will become submariners. However, now the troops themselves throw a cry. who will volunteer? And there will always be brave guys who will respond to it. At this time, only vile swindlers can take care of their soul and body. Those who ended up in prison received a guarantee that nothing would happen to them. If this continues for three or four years, then the balance of the nation will be upset: some will die, while others will save their lives! Now imprisonment is no longer a punishment. And at the same time, in the Volkov cauldron, the soldiers lie on the bare ground, without sleep, sometimes without food. From now on, everything happens in the people like this: the broad masses are neither good nor bad. It is the extreme positions that determine the outcome of the case. If you steadily reduce the good, but at the same time keep the bad, what will happen is what happened in 1918 - 500 or 600 vagabonds raped an entire nation. The opposite idealistic pole no longer exists."



Although Mein Kampf did not make any statements about penal units, some of the ideas from the Nazi bible indirectly influenced their creation. How popular racist positions turned out to be among army lawyers can be judged by the fact that Erich Schwinge, based on the "information" of army psychiatry, even before the start of the war called on his judicial colleagues from the pages of the Journal of Military Law: "We cannot once again allow so that the war hit the valuable elements of our people very hard. In this situation, Darwinian selection will go in the opposite direction. We cannot allow the best to give their lives at the front, while the physically and spiritually handicapped undermine the position of our homeland."

It is quite obvious that social Darwinist attitudes were taken into account when creating the "test units". The protagonists of racist teachings tried in every way to prevent "reverse selection". This trend was most clearly expressed in the creation by Heinrich Himmler of a "special SS formation - Dirlewanger", named after the commander, this SS unit was mainly engaged in the fight against partisans. At first, it consisted of several SS men and 70 poachers (hence one of the names "poacher brigade"), who, at the behest of Hitler, were given a chance to "redemption". Soon this formation was replenished with "professional criminals" and "asocial elements" who were recruited for service from concentration camps. Then came the turn of "foreign" collaborators who wanted to get the SS title. When in February 1944 it was supposed to make another set of concentration camp prisoners, Heinrich Himmler said: "I ask all the heads of the main departments of the SS to think and not forget that it is better to make a bloody sacrifice, bringing the guilty people to the grave, but through this save a few glorious German youths. The same ideas come through in the words of the chief of the SS Main Directorate, Gottlieb Berger, who in March 1944 proposed sending all guilty SS men to the Dirlewanger brigade. The letter with the corresponding sentence ended as follows: "At the same time, I clearly realize that not everyone is worthy of redemption, but they will have a chance to die worthily fighting the enemy."

In the first chapters of the book, it was already mentioned that the practice of "testing by the front" was used in the Wehrmacht during the Polish campaign. According to the documents of the High Command of the Ground Forces, something similar was practiced in the field units during the conquest of France. During the fighting on the Western Front in May 1940, 2,762 soldiers were sentenced to "trial by the front". It must be emphasized that only

In 177 cases (6.4%), the offenders were unable to "atone themselves" and did not pass the test. We can say that in most cases the disciplinary goal was achieved. 93.6% of the guilty "reformed" and, thanks to "bold actions, atoned for their misdeeds."

Now it is difficult to give separate examples of such "heroism". But it can be stated that the positive experience should have prompted the leadership of the Reich to expand the scope of the "test by the front." This is how the "test part-500" arose.

The basis for the creation of the "test unit-500" (also known as the 500th battalion) was the order of the Fuhrer of December 21, 1940, which was subsequently supplemented by five instructions from the Wehrmacht High Command. It is still unknown whether Hitler himself came up with such an initiative or whether he was pushed to this decision. However, one way or another, the first mention of the 500th battalion can be found already in September 1940, when the draft order of Hitler was being prepared. This draft was submitted, together with an eight-page explanatory note, to the Imperial Ministry of Justice to Rudolf Lehmann. He had the deepest sympathy for the National Socialists, as the new regime revived the once dying military justice. At the first all-German congress of lawyers, which took place in May 1939, Lehmann not only expressed his loyalty to the Fuhrer, but also called on every military judge to help the General Staff in everything. But let's get back to the documents that ended up on Leman's desk. Before we get into the details of the comments, let's pay attention to Hitler's order itself. Its final wording read: "I have repeatedly pointed out that in war it is necessary to resort to the most severe measures in order to maintain discipline in the unit and fundamentally suppress any attempt

manifestations of cowardice. This is how it should be done in the future. However, I would like to give the honest soldiers of the Wehrmacht, who once stumbled in a difficult situation, a chance for testing, which is impossible and inappropriate to do in their own unit.

"Impossible" such a test was in units that did not take part in hostilities; "Inappropriate", since the rapid appearance of the offender in the location of the combat unit could adversely affect discipline. As a way out of this situation, the formation of special "test units" was proposed. About them, the order said: "Service in such a unit is no less honorable than ordinary military service. These formations in no case have a penalty character."

From the very beginning, this undertaking was an attempt to return to the front soldiers who, despite the offense committed, with a certain degree of probability were considered reliable or at least as soldiers suitable for combat operations. It is noteworthy that in this case, the leadership of the Reich resorted to a certain propaganda disguise, not speaking openly, which could be observed in other situations. Let us recall at least the military judge Fritz Hodes, who in the same 1940 spoke of field penal camps as "Wehrmacht concentration camps."

In the period from September 1940, when the draft order of the Fuhrer was prepared, until December 21, 1940, when this order was issued, active preparations were made to form the 500th "test unit". At this time, relative calm reigned on the continent. In any case, a specific date for the use of the new formation has not yet been determined. If we proceed from the fact that the main task of the 500th unit was the "education" and "testing" of a soldier who should then return to the ranks of the Wehrmacht (which is actually indicated by all the signs), then the very fact of the existence of a special formation could hardly help to strengthen disciplines. The new practice required really dangerous situations, which could only develop in a zone of active hostilities. The 500th unit was not intended simply for serving a sentence. Similar thoughts can be traced quite clearly in the report of the military judge Mayer-Branecke, which is dated November 12, 1941. "Serving a sentence through probation does not pursue

interests of the offender. It is aimed at correcting the situation on the fronts and at strengthening discipline.

These words are echoed by a document issued on September 18, 1940 from the depths of the Wehrmacht's right administration: "The tasks for her must be exceptional." The rigidity with which Leman speaks about the 500th part is striking. These expressions bear little resemblance to the text of Hitler's order. The transition may seem too abrupt: "The use of the part must take place in the most difficult and most dangerous conditions." And, finally, in the final wording of the comments on the draft order, the following was stated: "A unit can be formed only upon the resumption of hostilities. It must be sent to the most dangerous sectors of the front—this is precisely its main function. Until then, it should be used for the most difficult jobs."

You don't have to be an analyst to understand that the "resumption of hostilities" meant an attack on the Soviet Union, for which direct preparations began already in the summer of 1940. All preparatory measures of a political, economic and military nature were included in the Barbarossa plan, which was signed by Hitler on December 18, 1940 - that is, three days before the order for the 500th unit was issued. Only in this bundle can you see the true purpose of the "test part 500". Despite the illusions prevailing in the General Staff regarding the combat power of the Red Army, they nevertheless realized that the new Eastern campaign would require greater discipline from the army than it had been during the conquest of Europe. And therefore, the formation of the "test unit 500", on the one hand, was a kind of extensive preventive measure designed to "maintain self-control in the Wehrmacht" (that is, an instrument of intimidation arose), but on the other hand, it became possible to leave soldiers who were convicted because of

lack of the same "self-control". We see that the emergence of the 500th unit was planned specifically for the start of aggression against the USSR.

Attention is drawn to the fact that in this situation it was the goal that determined the nature of the "test part 500". Outwardly, it resembled the already pre-existing "special units". However, their target settings did not fit the 500th part. In the "special units" there were mainly such soldiers who were assessed as "inferior, incompetent, weak-willed." In the new formation, we see a different situation.

Specially selected officers and non-commissioned officers were to turn it into a successful combat unit. If we look at the composition of the "500th unit", we will see that active soldiers were sent here, who, with weapons in their hands, wanted to show courage in order to prove that "they are worthy of an honorable service to protect the German people in the ranks of the Wehrmacht." When reading these lines, one gets the feeling that the selection was almost in a special kind of elite units. After stating the fact that "criminals in the usual sense of the word" should not fall into the new formation in any way, the head of the right department of the Wehrmacht expressed the following idea regarding the recruitment of "test soldiers": "For sending to the new unit, prisoners are taken into account who committed a fault. This does not include prisoners from penal camps. Only incorrigible violators and carriers of a spirit hostile to the army should be sent to penal camps. However, in the same camps, the commandant, relying on personal experience, can find people who still might be worthy of testing by the front. At the same time, for soldiers who were sentenced to imprisonment during the war, the possibility of testing should not be provided. But even in prisons at the present time there are a sufficient number of people who have been punished much more severely than their offense would require in ordinary peaceful conditions. Some of the flawless soldiers that can be useful in war with the enemy, with prophylactic purposes, were

sentenced to prison. These people, who once succumbed to the temptations of war, must be given the chance to redeem themselves, no matter how difficult it may be.  
it turned out".

As you can see, the main contingent for the 500th unit was to be selected from Wehrmacht prisons, which did not exclude searches in penal camps. This point of view was not indisputable. It caused some dissatisfaction in the High Command of the Ground Forces. After the war, one of the eyewitnesses reported: "The Commander-in-Chief of the Ground Forces intended to abandon the idea of \u200b\u200bcreating special test units, which he outlined in his report to the Wehrmacht command. But he failed. He only managed to ensure that the battalion would become the largest new test unit in the future, while the Wehrmacht command was developing the idea of test regiments.

What reasons prompted the Commander-in-Chief of the Ground Forces to a negative conclusion is still unknown. Perhaps, Field Marshal Brauchitsch proceeded from the fact that such a special formation could be presented by enemy propaganda as a "gang of criminals", which in itself could undermine the credibility of the Wehrmacht. Indeed, such a threat was directly proportional to the size of the "special formation". Therefore, in the future, it was decided that if, contrary to all expectations, the selected "test soldiers" turned out to be very unreliable, then a large sector of the front held by the "test regiment" would be in serious danger. For this reason, "test units" had to be part of the regular troops, and their size should not go beyond the size of a battalion. For this reason, Hitler's order stated: "This special unit must first be established in the ground forces at the size of a battalion." At the same time, the head of the legal department of the Wehrmacht proceeded from the fact that it was necessary to plan for the presence of two "test battalions for one regiment."

After Hitler handed over to the High Command of the Ground Forces the project to create "test units", which in the future were to be created in all three parts of the Wehrmacht, Brauchitsch on March 12, 1941 gave the order: "By April 1, 1941, the command of military district IX should create in Meiningen, the 500th battalion, taking into account the schedule of combat strength and combat equipment of October 1, 1937, and according to the schedule of rifle company 1316 of December 1, 1939. It is in this document that the 500th battalion is first mentioned. The specified schedules of combat strength and combat equipment just corresponded to one ordinary infantry battalion. Initially, it was assumed that the 500th battalion would consist of a headquarters and three rifle companies. But in the end it was decided that the battalion would consist of four companies, and the fourth company would be "heavy", that is, it would be armed with machine guns. According to another order, the authorized personnel, before June 1, 1941, were to put the first of the created 500th battalions on alert.

The authorized personnel of the 500th battalion consisted mainly of soldiers and officers who had already participated in the hostilities. In particular, the Brauchitsch order stated: "The ground forces are tasked with allocating 5 officers, 15 non-commissioned officers, 51 soldiers for the battalion headquarters; for three rifle companies - 12 officers, 84 non-commissioned officers, 15 soldiers, of which 3 cyclists, 3 drivers, 3 combat assistants for most cases, 6 cooks. Military District IX must be provided with 3 horsemen and 13 soldiers for food supply and clothing transport.

Simultaneously with the 500th infantry battalion, intended for special use, a "mixed infantry-reserve company 500" arose in the barracks of Meiningen, which was formed from the "remnants" that were not included in the special battalion. Otto M., one of the non-commissioned officers of the fourth (machine-gun) company of the 256th battalion, who was based in Neustadt, told about it. At the beginning of June 1941, he was sent to Meiningen in order to become part of the authorized personnel of the 500th battalion that was being created. He recalled: "The 500th battalion was almost ready to be sent to the East, all staff units were distributed, and all those who had not yet arrived were sent to a mixed infantry-reserve company under the command of reserve captain Hünnerbein. This company remained in Meiningen until September 28, 1941, and then was transferred to Fulda. There, on its basis, another 500th infantry battalion was formed. Hunerbein immediately received the rank of major. It remains to be noted that work on the creation of the 500th battalion in Fulda began already in August 1941. The 500th battalion was stationed in Fulda until the end of September 1942. At first, he submitted to the court of the 159th division, and then the neighboring 409th infantry division. The head office of these divisional courts was located in Frankfurt am Main.

Looking ahead, it must be said that the 500th battalion in Fulda became not only a model for creating all the other 500th battalions, but also was some kind of preparatory work for the formation of infantry battalions 540, 550, 560, 561. If we talk about the "test units", then their core was formed by battalions that had five hundredth numbers: 500.540, 550.560 and 561.

The organization of the first two companies of the 540th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion began on October 8, 1941. Both of these companies entered combat operations as part of Army Group North in November 1941, that is, long before the headquarters and the two missing companies were formed (which, incidentally, were completed only by February 1942).

According to Georg Tesin, the creation of the 550th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion began at the end of 1941. Heinz Helms, sent to this unit as an accountant, reported that at first it was based in Meiningen. "In January 1942, we were transferred to Dalyerda-Rhön, to the military training ground in Wildflecken. Dalyerda was a small village. And on March 8, 1942, our battalion was taken by rail in an easterly direction. After the 500th battalion fought as part of Army Group South, and the 540th Battalion as part of Army Group North, the 550th Battalion ended up as part of Army Group Center. As you can see, each of the three army groups that fought against the Red Army had its own "test battalion". 560th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion

formed on August 8, 1942 in Hanau, from where a month later it was transferred to the aforementioned training ground in Wildflecken. There, where the 540th battalion was previously located.

The formation of the 561st battalion took place in Erfurt. Even the official date of its creation is known - January 13, 1943. On February 20, 1943, the replenishment of the ranks of the 561st battalion took place already at the Ohrdruf training ground. The new formation in April 1943 was to join the ranks of Army Group North.

On January 24, 1943, the High Command of the Ground Forces issued an order to reinforce all "test units" with one platoon of grenadiers, one anti-tank platoon ("tank destroyers") and three anti-tank 37 mm guns. However, the matter was not limited to the transfer of guns to the 500th battalions. On top of that, the authorized personnel of each of the battalions increased from 850 to 900 people. In the middle of 1943, it came to the point that a regular headquarters company arose, which consisted of a platoon of a battalion commander, a platoon of a headquarters company commander, a reconnaissance squad, a sapper platoon, a rifle platoon, an anti-tank platoon, and a food convoy. Taking into account these changes, the staffing of the 500th battalions began to amount to 992 people. In August 1944, some of the battalions were equipped with heavy mortars.

As Horst Voigt, the commander of one of the companies of the 561st battalion, recalled: "The battalion was divided into a headquarters company (without a number), three rifle companies each of three rifle platoons, a machine gun company of three machine gun platoons, a mortar platoon, which was later equipped with a heavy mortar (120 mm)". Each of the battalions was partially motorized, and also had horses at its disposal (at the end of the war, all battalions were fully motorized). Changes in the composition of the battalions were predetermined by the situation on the fronts. Heavy 120 mm mortars, which were moved by caterpillar tractors, as a rule, Vostok tractors, were attached to the 500th battalions in the winter of 1943-1944. The mortars were part of the 4th company. It remains to add that in December 1944, the fifth and sixth companies began to appear in the battalions. As a result, as the documents show, the replenishment significantly exceeded the losses incurred. Nevertheless, against the background of the general situation in the Wehrmacht, such measures were an exception.

But back to the fate of the battalions themselves. At the end of 1942, the 500th battalion from Fulda was sent to the "governor general" in the Polish town of Skierniewice, in order to rush from there to the Eastern Front. In Skierniewice, the 500th battalion came under the jurisdiction of the commandant's office 225. When it became clear that the barracks in the Polish city were not able to accommodate the entire battalion, a barracks camp was built in the vicinity of the town of Tomaszow Mazowiecki (the German name is Tomaszow-Mac). . Interesting fact. At the same time, the formation of another 500th battalion began in Skierniewice, which consisted of a headquarters and five training companies. It was at this moment that the 500th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion moved to Tomaszow. It was in Skierniewice that some changes took place in the "test part 500". This is due to the fact that it was at that time that the "test part 999" was being formed.

In the middle of the Swabian Alps, which is a mountainous landscape, the Heuberg training ground was located. In Heuberg there were many barracks and barracks that could accommodate up to 9,000 people. The Heuberg training ground continued military traditions for decades. In 1913, along with the training grounds in Döberitz, Altengrabow, Königsbrück, he was considered one of the strongholds of the Reichswehr, where the strictest discipline reigned. After the defeat of Germany in the First World War, the site was used for public benefit purposes. Everything changed when the National Socialists came to power. In April 1933, a concentration camp was set up there. This was the first concentration camp in Württemberg, followed by others. In those days, the Heuberg camp was actually cut off from the outside world. There were no farms or villages in its vicinity. It was downright ideal territory for the rising SS, who could use Heuberg as they saw fit. None of the outsiders could see the torture and mockery of the prisoners. Initially, the Heuberg camp was designed for two thousand prisoners. However, over time, 15 thousand anti-fascists turned out to be here. A turning point in the fate of the camp occurred in November 1933, when the Reichswehr demanded

return the lands and buildings that once belonged to him. In the period 1942-1943, the training ground became a training base for employees of the 999th battalions. It was there that it became clear that a number of recruits simply could not serve in the future "African Brigade".

Then one of the commanders of the regiment, which later became the African 999th division, said: "I'd rather go to the front with an incomplete unit than with people I don't trust." Selected by military courts and doctors, the 999th, after consultation with the High Command of the Ground Forces, were immediately assigned to the 500th Battalion. Already in October 1942, several hundred 999s first gradually arrived in Fulda, and then in Skierniewice. In the 500th battalion, the appearance of "new human material" did not arouse enthusiasm at all. Albert Mainz, a political prisoner who was included in the 999 in December 1942, after the war, recalled how he arrived in Fulda as part of a group of 200 people:

Hunerbein, whom the warriors called nothing more than a "bag of bones." Upon arrival in Fulda, he personally lined us up in the courtyard of the barracks of the 500th battalion. After examining us, he said: "It's amazing that someone would have thought to send 999s that froze their asses in Stettin. Do you think that from such people, who are even below any level from a hygienic point of view, and in addition are infected with communist bacilli, you can make excellent fighters for the Eastern Front? No, nothing will come of it! At least not in my unit!" Then Hünnerbein turned and strode away. "Let it be so!" we thought. Too bad we couldn't applaud him. But then the major seemed to read our thoughts, he turned, raised his cane and shouted: "In four weeks you will be thrown out of here, if I weren't Major Hunerbein!"

The major's words about "excellent fighters" once again suggest that the designation of the 500th battalions as "special purpose" units was dictated not only by their test character, but also by their "shock" purpose. Major Hunerbein, as promised, took all measures to get rid of the 999s for any reason. Some time later, the fact that these 999s could not serve in "tropical units" was forgotten, and they were all sent back to Heuberg. But nevertheless, with an active discussion of the fate of the 999s, it turned out that some of them may be suitable for non-combatant service. On this occasion, Heuberg's chief of staff complained in his letter dated April 19, 1943 to the commander of the African 999th division: military service. Since these 165 people actually turned out to be unfit for service in the field, I am now stubbornly trying to shove them somewhere.

However, it was at this time that this issue was resolved at the highest level. On April 2, 1943, an order was issued that ordered the creation of a construction company in the 500th battalion. "1. The 5th company of the 17th battalion is transferred to the 500th infantry battalion in Skierniewice. 2. The company is a test formation. 3. Employees of the company will be supplied from among the soldiers of the 500th infantry battalion, fit to carry out garrison service. It was to this company that most of the 999s were sent, which were an eyesore to regular military personnel. A telephone message from Major Schiefer, who was in charge of the "testing" issues at the High Command of the Ground Forces, gave clearer instructions regarding the use of recruits from Heuberg: "All the mentioned people who are fit for military service must be sent to the construction company. Doctors should henceforth be required to adhere to stricter criteria in the selection of recruits. All the people under discussion who turned out to be fit only for non-combatant service should be returned to the places from where they were called up for military service, that is, to places of serving their sentence, if they did not serve it, or returned to civilian service, if either they were convicted in military service. the past."

From the memoirs of the political prisoner G. Schumann, who first became the 999th, and in December 1942 ended up in Fulda, and then in Skierniewice, it followed that the first task of the construction company was the restoration of "the old Russian field camp, whose six buildings were erected back in tsarist times. Perhaps it was about the camp in the vicinity of Tomashov, which later became the habitat of the 500th Special Purpose Battalion.

In early May 1943, the 5th construction company, together with the 17th construction battalion, was involved in work to strengthen the citadel on the French island of Groix. Despite the territorial gap, the 5th company in organizational terms continued to be considered an integral part of the 500th test battalion. And only in August 1943 she was introduced into the 999th test unit. The 999th special-purpose construction battalion arose from the construction company, and after some rearrangements it was divided into two position-sapper battalions (1-999 and 11-999). From now on, all the guilty soldiers, who, according to physical data, could not be used at the front, and therefore could not serve in the 500s

battalions were sent to one of the eight companies of these 999 construction battalions. Moreover, a fundamental distinction was made between the "unworthy of service" and the guilty soldiers. From the documents it follows that the first two companies were intended for soldiers, and the remaining six for the "unworthy". Thanks to the organizational demarcation with the construction companies, the 500th test battalion was able to retain the character of a purely combat formation. Contrary to some statements, neither the 540th nor the 561st road construction battalions belonged to this category.

The main task of the 500th Special Purpose Battalion and the 500th Field Training Battalion, which were based respectively in Tomashov and Skierniewice, was to prepare soldiers for operations at the front. The already existing battalions (500, 540, 550, 560, 561) were considered as a field reserve, the so-called marching companies, with the help of which it was possible to quickly make up for losses on a particular sector of the front. Until September 1944, no new tasks were actually assigned to the battalions, with the exception of two special cases. In August 1943, a special company of the 500th battalion was created in Skierniewice, whose tasks included "fighting bandits." In this situation, Polish partisans were implied, showing increased activity in the area. As follows from the documents, this company even had a special field postal code 09854, which was inherent only in large independent military formations. With a certain degree of certainty, we can say that this company existed until the middle of 1944.

According to the memoirs of Horst Voit, this formation at the end of 1944 participated in the suppression of the Slovak National Uprising, and then in the fight against the Slovak partisans. "A company from the 500th test battalion took part in cleansing operations, and also fought in the Upper Tatras against bandits who arrived from Poland." Since no documents have been preserved on this issue, it is possible that confusion has occurred. A company from Poland could be confused with another 500th special-purpose battalion, which at the end of 1944 was located in Eastern Slovakia.

The second special case was the dispatch of two companies of the 500th battalion from Skierniewice to Tarnopol, where the Tarnopol Bastion was created from various army units and formations. During the spring offensive of 1944, the Red Army suddenly threatened the work of the transport hub in Tarnopol. Hitler expressed his will to create a network of "bastions" that would fight to the last man. Even after the fall of the fortified area, the Wehrmacht soldiers had to tie down the forces of the Red Army for as long as possible, thereby gaining time to create a new defensive line and prepare a powerful counteroffensive. Hastily formed to defend Tarnopol, the 500th battalion was better known as the "Fischer battle group". The fate of these "test soldiers" turned out to be unenviable - they all died, and on April 14, 1944, the "fortress" fell.

As the front approached, reserve formations and training battalions of the 500th began to gather in several places. In September 1944 they were based in Brunn (barracks named after Adolf Hitler, the building of the former Episcopal Youth Seminary and camp in Osinov Lane), in Olmütz (barracks named after Hindenburg and Richthofen). Now the "test units" were expanded to the size of the 500th Reserve Infantry Regiment, whose first battalion was located in Brunn, and the second in Olmütz. They say that a special convalescent company was formed from the wounded, where all the soldiers were divided alphabetically. List up

the letter "M" was attributed to Brunn, and all the rest to Olmütz. It follows from the documents that in 1945 there were two independent convalescent companies.

Simultaneously with the resettlement from Skierniewice-Tomaszow to Brunn-Olmütz, contacts were established with the 291st and 292nd Grenadier Battalions, which in September 1944 were formed in Karlsruhe. It is absolutely incomprehensible why these battalions became "test". But numerous recollections of eyewitnesses indicate that some of the employees of the 500th battalion were sent ahead of time from Tomashov to Karlsruhe in order to start the formation of the 291st and 292nd test grenadier battalions there in a timely manner. However, this does not explain why these battalions used a non-traditional numbering for "test units", as well as why they were called grenadier, and not infantry battalions. Perhaps this was done in order to hide from the enemy the "special nature" of this formation. If we talk about fundamental differences, then the traditional 500th battalions for passing the "test" were distributed among army groups on the Eastern Front, and the mentioned grenadier battalions were to fight on the Western Front as part of the 19th Army. Perhaps this is due to the increased influence of Heinrich Himmler. On July 20, 1944, after the failed plot and assassination attempt on Hitler, Himmler was appointed commander of the reserve army. On September 1, 1944, he received the task of carrying out measures to increase combat readiness in the western military districts, in particular, in the military districts MI, KhPI and U. However, Himmler became the commander of the Upper Rhine Army Group, to which both grenadier battalions belonged, Himmler became only in December 1944, while the battalions were created in October 1944.

The appearance of the 291st and 292nd Grenadier Battalions opened a whole series of innovations in the field "test formations". The main reason for this lay in the various activities that Heinrich Himmler, in his role as the new commander in chief, carried out in the reserve army. For the most part, this concerned the practice of executing punishments in the Wehrmacht and the very essence of the "test". The beginning was laid by the order of the Supreme Command of the Ground Forces of November 30, 1944. According to this document, in the Army Group North, which had already been blockaded in Courland, the 491st Special Purpose Infantry Battalion was created from the prisoners, which was to become (and became) a replacement for the 500th Infantry Regiment from Brunn. Consequently, the 491st battalion was a copy of the 500th "test unit". The formal reason for the creation of the 491st battalion as a kind of 500th units was the impossibility of transporting "test soldiers" from Germany. From now on, "test units" could be formed right at the front, in fact, bypassing military jurisdiction.

Meanwhile, in the winter of 1944-1945, four more 500th battalions were formed in Brunn, which were supposed to start military operations in Upper Silesia. Horst H., one of the officers who was arrested and then sentenced to three years in prison for undermining the combat capability of the army, recalled in 1948: "I must note here that our battalion was not the original 500th 'test battalion', but only one from reserve battalions hastily assembled in late 1944 - early 1945 in Brunn. Approximately five 'front' battalions were formed, which still had the old name VV-500 (Vemdýgipdýbagaop-500 - test battalion-500), to which the name of its commander was added as a special characteristic. My battalion was called Fischer P. I still remember there was a Kaupé battalion. The rest of the names have been forgotten. It follows from the documents that four battalions were combined into the 500th Grenadier Regiment. Moreover, each of the battalions had the following names: Schmidtman I, Fischer P (aka "Fischer's Battle Group"), Berger PI, Kaupé IU. The fifth battalion mentioned by Horst H. does not appear anywhere in the documents. Which does not exclude that it did exist, but in the chaos of the end of the war, the papers simply were not executed. It is possible that this fifth battalion was the same unit that Horst Voight mentioned. It was created in April 1945 - Major Oiling was to command it. It was the 500th reinforced anti-tank

battalion. In addition, in April 1945, two more "alarm battalions" were created in Olmütz, one of which was headed by Captain Zike, the former commander of one of the 500th battalions formed in Tomasov.



As you can see, starting from September 1944, at least nine (most likely ten) battalions were sent to the front. In the chaos of the end of the war, it is difficult to understand and establish the composition and available weapons not only of the 291st and 292nd, but also of the "classic" 500th battalions. The nature of some formations, such as the 570th Grenadier Battalion, remains unclear. According to some reports, on February 21, 1945, the command of the 17th Army formed the "Glac test battalion" (named after the place where one of the Wehrmacht prisons was located). However, the sources say nothing about this combat unit. It should be noted that in some armies in "crisis situations" they independently created "test formations" from prisoners and guilty soldiers. Most likely, such units had no organizational relationship to the 500th battalions.

And a few words about the strength of the 500th battalions. In his book *Military Justice in the German Wehrmacht*, Franz Seidler reported that "approximately 82,000 men served in the test battalions." Unfortunately, it is not possible to find exact figures in the sources. Horst Voit wrote in 1982: "One captain prudently evacuated to Bavaria 82 thousand cards of employees of the 500th battalions. Since then, they have been considered missing. But this figure provides a basis for determining the amount of service during the four war years. If Voight is careful about the foundation, Seidler confidently takes this figure for granted. However, even if these cards existed, the question remains whether they only concerned "trial soldiers" or whether "regular personnel" were included in their number. The latter numbered about 16 thousand people in 500 battalions. Then it turns out that only 66,000 "test subjects" actually served. Gens-Peter Klausz in his works, on the basis of indirect sources, derives a completely different figure. He speaks of 33 thousand employees of the 500th battalions, 6 thousand of which were full-time personnel. In order to explain where the figure of 82 thousand people came from, he is trying to prove that this is supposedly the total number of all "test units", including the 999th battalions.

## Chapter 2 The situation of "test soldiers"

As mentioned above, according to the will of Hitler, the 500th "test units" "did not have a penal character," and service in them was as honorable as any other military service. There is an opinion in the literature that neither the first nor the second statements corresponded to reality. Is it so? This can be confirmed or refuted only by studying the situation of the "test soldiers".

Although most of the soldiers from the 500th battalions already had certain military skills, they nevertheless had to undergo military training again. The problem was that employees of not only various branches of the armed forces, but also various army specializations (artillerymen, sappers, orderlies, etc.) had to undergo training. According to the order of March 12, 1941, the course was focused on training instructions for rifle companies. The preparation period was to last no more than three months, in some cases it could be shorter.

With regard to practice, one of the "statutory employees" Johann Fricke, who arrived in Fulda in 1941, noted: "It is incredible how trained they were." Heinz Helms, who was also a member of the "statutory personnel", recalled the preparation of the 550th battalion in the spring of 1942: "The formation was loaded as much as its use in the East required." In a similar way, the former "subjects

soldiers." Karl-Heinz Schultz, who found himself in Skierniewitz at the beginning of 1944, recalled: "There we were engaged not only in drill training, but also in tactical exercises on the ground." Joachim T. summed it up: "The drill was tough but it was prudent." The preparation was difficult, but most of the "test subjects" considered it reasonable, since it was about the upcoming actions on the Eastern Front. In addition, there were no Nazi "frills" in the 500th battalions, such as, for example, in Fort Torgau, when all commands, including eating, had to be carried out almost on the run.

Indicative is the retrospective assessment given by Albert Mainz in the article "The Time of the 500s". The author belonged to those 999s who were sent to the 500th battalion in the winter of 1942-1943. "The daily service was not easy. The young instructors, who were completely graduates of Napola, P 1, did not give us a descent, but did not make any concessions for themselves either - they, like us, also flopped into the puddles. Although none of them smoked, for us from time to time they arranged smoke breaks. As we can see, the "statutory personnel" opposed themselves to the "test subjects", but at the same time tried to maintain comradely relations. There could be various reasons for this. An important role was played by the simple idea that sooner or later most of the "test subjects" would have to be at the front. The same threatened many instructors. Heinrich Scheel, who arrived in one of the battalions in mid-1944, noticed that Remarque was often quoted in this regard, and special attention was paid to the figure of Sergeant Himmelstos, painted by him. But Wilhelm Wicciok expounded a different position: "People who are left behind you can also be deadly." Similar cases have happened in practice. One of the sergeants was shot in the back and then buried.

The military correct attitude of the "statutory personnel" to the "test subjects" was dictated not only by reinsurance. It was determined by many more personal factors, including the experience of the First World War and the November Revolution. In preparation, many Wehrmacht officers rightly believed that in the conditions of modern, mechanized mass warfare, it was necessary to reduce the too huge distance between officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers. It was about eliminating the "rift that reduced military effectiveness." Depending on the social background and personal attitudes of a particular officer, such aspirations were more likely to be either patriarchal-conservative in nature, or they were an expression of faith in the Nazi formula of the "people's community."

It was pointed out above that the 500th battalions, both during training and during their stay at the front, did not differ from the regular formations of the Wehrmacht either in uniform, or in armament, or in food supply. There were also no special directives, which, for example, were issued in October 1942 during the formation of the 999th battalions. In them, along with euphonious promises about a possible equalization with ordinary military personnel, the 999th faced significant restrictions: perusal of mail, curfew, the requirement of "the most severe service." Obviously, in the eyes of the High Command of the Wehrmacht, the "unworthy service" 999s convicted by a civil court were an order of magnitude lower than the employees of the 500th battalions, who were convicted by military courts. The perceptible difference in treatment practiced in the 500th battalions and the 999th units will become apparent if one takes into account the recollections of Albert Mainz, who served in the 561st battalion, trained in Erfurt. In the past, he was in the 999th, which was trained at the Heuberg training ground: "Our barracks were located in the Weimar direction, outside the city's outskirts, This place was called Nasedka. Every day after the end of classes, we were allowed to leave for the city. If we wanted, we could leave the camp even after the evening formation. Our housing was not surrounded by a fence with barbed wire, which we are quite used to. We even guarded the camp ourselves, while in Heuberg, for security reasons, we were not allowed to go to the guardhouse.

services. In Erfurt, we had the right to check any officer or sergeant major entering the camp. In other words, we were taken for people here. However, the biggest surprise was the incoming mail. In our free time after classes and work, we tried to take advantage of all the opportunities that were provided in Erfurt, whether it was sightseeing or some kind of entertainment."

In October 1942, "Special Orders" were issued for the 999 units, which actually divided all 999s into two classes. And this despite the fact that 8 13 of the Military Code did not make any distinction between "unworthy" who were convicted by a military or civil court. For the first time, this practice was applied only in July 1943, and finally took root only in 1944, when the Wehrmacht High Command issued unified "Special Instructions on the Legal and Official Status of Conditionally Worthy Service in Probationary Units." In fact, this meant that about 20% of "conditionally

worthy of service" could be sent to the 500th battalions. But in practice, it turned out that even in the battalions there was a different attitude towards "worthy" and "conditionally worthy of service." As Wilhelm N., who was sentenced to two years in prison for undermining combat capability, recalled, and at the beginning of 1944 he ended up in Tomashov: "It was forbidden to punish an employee of a test battalion in prison if he was awarded an order or medal." The same applied to leave and vacations, which were granted to those who had short prison terms and did not have a civil conviction. Wilhelm N. himself did not receive a single day of leave during his entire stay in the battalion.

Note that for the majority of the "test subjects" leave and leave were much more important than the permission or prohibition to wear orders and medals. Let's pay more attention to the "vacation issue", as it will allow us to better understand the internal structure of the 500th battalions. As it turned out, the position of the "test subjects" and the 999s was not equally bad. The battalions tried to create conditions reminiscent of the regular units of the Wehrmacht. However, there was one fundamental point that distinguished the 500th battalions from other army units. It was sanctioned by an order dated March 12, 1943: "Leave may be granted to soldiers transferred to a test formation, in general, only before being checked by the front." The wording "as a whole" indicated a certain freedom of action, especially when compared with a similar order for the 999th parts: "Vacation in principle is granted only after a long test at the front." During the front-line service, the "test subjects" did not receive any vacations. Unlike the soldiers of the front-line units, the employees of the 500th battalions had sufficient freedom of action. But on July 30, 1943, she was put an end to. The High Command of the Ground Forces issued a special directive in which the commanders of the 500th battalions were forbidden to grant leave.

Meanwhile, the top army leadership did not consider the 500th battalions as ordinary units. This is evidenced by one of the instructions: "The composition and special conditions in the test units bring to the fore particularly stringent requirements for discipline. This is due to the fact that they contain people who have been convicted in the past and who, by their nature, are unsafe. In order to control them, and subsequently use them at the front, it is necessary to root out any offenses at the root. Therefore, in order to intimidate, extremely harsh sentences must be passed." Such reasoning led to a significant number of executions, which was the reason for the rare cases of transferring "test subjects" to penal camps or back to "swamp camps". There are many examples of such rigidity. One of the "test subjects", sentenced to two years in prison for leaving the unit without permission, continued to commit offenses even in the 500th battalion. He was charged with theft and cowardice. The conclusion in his case stated: "Transfer to a test company is the last chance given to a soldier in order to

he showed that he was ready to atone for past wrongdoings, that he had a core inside. The one who did not take advantage, and did not even try to take advantage of this chance, cannot be at the forefront of the front. As commander of the second company of the 540th battalion, I declare that the defendant threatened discipline in the unit by his behavior. This circumstance is aggravated by the fact that the defendant has already been previously convicted. It can be assumed that he went to the battalion not in order to be tested by the front, but to avoid prison. For this reason, a soldier who commits such crimes while serving in a probationary unit can only be sentenced to death." As a result, instead of an 11-year prison sentence, the soldier was executed."

As a result, when the "test subjects" committed any more or less serious offenses, death sentences were passed almost automatically. And only in isolated cases of unauthorized abandonment of the unit (as a rule, when there were some extenuating circumstances), the soldiers were sentenced to long prison terms. This happened in the last year of the war, when there was an acute shortage of "human material". Then the death penalty was commuted to 12 or 15 years in prison, which could only be avoided by passing a "special test". The Third Reich needed "cannon fodder" more than ever. But even when the death penalty was suspended or commuted, that was the exception, just

confirming the rule. A similar rule worked, for example, during the trial of Eduard R. from the 561st battalion. For "cowardice in battle and desertion" he was sentenced to death. His sentence ended with the cynical words: "In order to intimidate and raise the spirits of the remaining test teams, I consider it necessary to immediately put the sentence into effect." Hans-Peter Klausz, in his research, counted 136 death sentences passed on "test subjects" from the 500th battalions. In most cases, it was about desertion, cowardice in battle, undermining combat capability, self-mutilation ("crossbow"). The first such case dates back to September 29, 1941, and the last to April 9, 1945. The number 136 is naturally incomplete. This is only the part that the researchers managed to establish despite the obvious lack of documents. There is information about the loss of more than a hundred sentences during the war.

If we talk about the executions themselves, then the practice of the 999th parts was taken as the basis. Back in October 1942, it was decided that in the 999th "probationary unit" for "intimidating and educational purposes" the imposition of the death sentence would be public. The guilty were shot before the general formation. From December 1942 to October 1944 this gloomy "spectacle" in Heuberg and Baumholder took place forty times. In total, 65 out of 999 were executed. Presumably, the same practice was applied in the first two cases of executions in the 500th battalions. Contrary to lofty statements, all this points to a certain penal nature of the battalions. Ojo M. recalled after the war: "In the summer of 1941, two soldiers from the fourth company were executed at the shooting range in Fulda. I don't know the name of the first one. The second was named Hans Pross. He was from the vicinity of Stuttgart. His father was a government official. His son has repeatedly tried to desert." Perhaps, in this case, it was about the executions that were described by Wilhelm Wicciok. As an eyewitness, he reported: "Both executions in Fulda took place with the unit in full formation. The battalion barely fit on the shooting range. There was a pillar, a special company and a priest. One was dragged to a pole. The second one came by. He pretended not to be afraid. He walked as if he were taking a daily walk." However, it was subsequently decided to abandon public executions. Ojo M. reported about the possible reasons for such a decision: "There were reports that the population of Fulda was outraged that executions were carried out in the vicinity of the city, therefore, in the future, suicide bombers were sent to Frankfurt."

Hans-Peter Klausz in his study believes that the protests of the population of Fulda were by no means the only reason for the refusal of public executions. Most likely it was decided

abandon such methods of intimidation in order to maintain the self-control of the "test subjects". Such "performances" could cause disgust and rejection not only among the employees of the battalion, but also among the "statutory personnel" themselves. As a result, this was not in the interests of the battalion command, and therefore, not in the interests of the Wehrmacht.

But all these conclusions concerned only life in the rear; at the front, the situation was somewhat different. There, the refusal to build during the execution was due to other reasons. Firstly, it was very difficult to build a whole battalion on the front line. Secondly, such a formation simply exposed a certain section of the front. However, exceptions were sometimes made. This was the case with Fritz P. Called into the 121st Infantry Division, he was subjected to numerous ridicule, as a result of which he decided to fire a crossbow. The death sentence passed was commuted to him by passing a "special test" in the 540th battalion. By the way, Fritz P. lagged behind his peers in development, was an orphan, had a difficult childhood. For this reason, the battalion commander sent him to serve in the laundry. However, after some time, it was decided to shoot him. The documents read: "At first, the convict showed a desire to pass the test, gradually he began to lose his will. In recent days, the convict hatched a plan to go over to the side of the enemy. After revealing his plan, he showed during the investigation that the poor treatment of the children and the lack of food were just an excuse - in fact, he wanted to go over to the Russians, he was so eager to end the war, which he was afraid of. The execution took place at 10 am on January 21, 1943. The execution was carried out in a place where the whole battalion, which did not leave its location, could see it. Given the heavy defensive battles waged by the Wehrmacht in those days, such an event was an obvious measure of intimidation, which was supposed to force the "test subjects" to hold out to the last.

However, this did not always happen. Sometimes "test subjects" were killed without trial or investigation during desertion, which was very reminiscent of the camp practice "shot while trying to escape." So, for example, on June 13, 1943, one of the "test subjects" was killed by a field gendarme in the vicinity of Siverskaya. Such situations in the regular parts of the Wehrmacht were simply impossible. As a rule, in the field, executions began to be carried out much easier. An employee of the 550th Battalion, Rudy Heiermann, described one such case: "A tested soldier was sentenced to death for undermining combat capability and cowardice. During execution, he was not tied to a tree and was not even blindfolded. Ten people were chosen to be the firing squad. Until the shots rang out, he looked at his friends. In 1944, the new commander-in-chief of the reserve army, Heinrich Himmler, made his "contribution" to this process. He ordered: "For intimidation and for educational reasons, soldiers should be sent to firing squads who have already given cause for criticism." This practice was depressing. One of the soldiers of the "statutory personnel" of the 550th battalion, Johann Fricke, recalled how he had to participate in the execution: "Once we had to shoot one of ours. He was a good soldier, he was even awarded the Iron Cross. For us, being awarded the Iron Cross meant something. Somehow, we were faced with a difficult offensive operation, in which everyone had to participate. But his nerves gave out, and he was the first to try to escape. When the operation was over, he returned to the unit. He wasn't a coward - that could happen to anyone. But we were told that at dawn we were to shoot him like a coward."

As a result, we can say with confidence that the 500th battalions, contrary to Hitler's assurances, were still penal units. Despite some indulgence, which related to leave, vacations and relations with "statutory personnel", strict discipline reigned in the battalions, the violation of which was punished by measures inherent only in penal units. As a result, if the definition of "penal battalion" is ideal for characterizing the 999th units, then in relation to the 500th battalions it would be more correct to speak of a "shock penal unit".

### Chapter 3 Baptism of Fire of the 500th Battalions

In the course of direct preparations for an attack on the Soviet Union, the 500th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion was already included in the 101st Infantry Division, which was part of the newly formed 17th Army, on May 14, 1941. Until June 8, 1941, the battalion was based northwest of the border river San in the vicinity of Przemyśl. In fact, the battalion was part of the 101st division until the summer of 1943. The 500th battalion followed with the 17th army, which was supposed to strike at Lvov (Lemberg), then, following through Kharkov, Kramatorsk, reach the Caucasus. Having planned an offensive operation, the Wehrmacht forces had to capture Maykop, Grozny and Baku, cutting off the Red Army from oil fields. The very development of the oil-bearing region was supposed to be handed over to the semi-state concerns Continental Erdöl AG, Grozny IGFarben, Deutsche Erdöl AG, Wintershall, Proyzag, as well as a number of large banks. Such a breakthrough, on the one hand, provided fuel for the forces of the Wehrmacht, and on the other hand, was to lay the foundations for a new oil empire, which would be a prerequisite for establishing world domination.

During the first two days of the implementation of the Barbarossa plan, the 500th battalion was in reserve. On the evening of June 24, 1941, the battalion occupied the Ukrainian village of Pozdzyak, where the next morning it received the first "real" combat order. Already in the first days of the war, many of the "test subjects" discovered its criminal nature. Lorenz Knauf, a soldier of the "statutory personnel" of the battalion, recalled: "On June 21 we were in positions. Then we marched. And in the morning a chief corporal arrived, who delivered three Russians from among civilians. We were still in the trenches. He threw: "They came from the other side of the border." He placed all three of them on the parapet of the trench, and then began to shoot them in turn in the back of the head with a pistol. We were very puzzled ... During our first combat operation on the second day of the war, civilians began to arrive from different places. They wanted to get over the front line. There was an anti-tank gun, behind which was a lieutenant. He drove all those gathered to an open place, which was well shot through, and then opened fire. All died. I saw a dead woman with a small child lying in a crater, who just wanted to hide from the war.

The task that the 500th battalion received on the morning of June 25 was to carry out reconnaissance in force in the area of the Medyuki fortifications. In the military reports of the 101st Light Infantry (later Jaeger) Division, the planned operation was called nothing more than a raid: "The 500th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion, suffering heavy losses, occupied Hill 228 despite heavy artillery fire and flanking fire from a bunker near Medyuka." How great these losses turned out to be can be established from the fact that the next day an order was given from the remnants of the 500th battalion to form one company. The formation in the very first battle lost, according to the most conservative estimates, more than half of its composition. Here the question arises: was the battalion a "suicide team" - an "ascension team"? If we follow the information provided by the division commander, the following picture emerges: when the battalion moved east with fierce fighting on the morning of June 25, Lieutenant General Marks gave the battalion commander a verbal order: to curtail the offensive and cover the right flank. However, in the afternoon of the same day, a strange situation developed. "The 500th battalion, contrary to my order," the general reported, "continued the offensive and took Hill 250, while capturing several enemy bunkers without the support of artillery and sappers." It turned out that this was not an order to go to certain death, but only the ambition of the commander, who put half the battalion under fire. At that time, the battalion commander was Major Welenkamp. The 19-year-old commander of the radio communications department of the 101st division, Baron Meinrad von Ov, recalled this officer: "He was a teacher by profession. He wore a gold party badge. It was said that the commander

the battalion was appointed by the Fuhrer himself. I felt that he was pleased by these rumors, although I had never heard a single Nazi saying from him. Perhaps it was the result of the risky operation that saved Major Welenkamp from the tribunal, who violated the general's order.

As the 101st Division moved east, the forces of the 500th Battalion continued to disperse, although there were still no such high losses as at Medyuka. When studying the combat log of the 101st Jaeger Division, one gets the impression that in the first six months of the war, the 500th battalion received exactly the same tasks as all other military units. After reinforcements arrived from Fulda in September 1941, the "test company" again became the 500th battalion. In early January 1942, its numbers were fully restored, and it participated in the defense of the cities of Slavyansk and Kramatorsk. It is noteworthy that at that time a battalion of Belgian volunteers, the so-called Walloon infantry battalion, was part of the 17th Army. At the end of 1941, the Belgian unit was almost completely demoralized. One of the messages said that "the mood here borders on treason." Nothing like this was observed in the 500th battalion.

Former senior field judge Lattman, who personally participated in the preparation of the 500th battalion, wrote after the war: "Specially selected commanders of the battalion, companies and platoons during the fighting on the Eastern Front in August 1941 were COMPLETELY SATISFIED WITH THEIR PEOPLE."

But as we found out, the baptism of fire of the 500th battalion was not even in August, but in June 1941. Lattman then reported: "The army tried not to send the battalion to particularly difficult tasks, so as not to undermine confidence in the capabilities of front-line testing." Such a statement contrasts greatly against the background of the words of the head of the Legal Department Leman, which were uttered in September 1940. Recall that he demanded that the most difficult assignments be entrusted to the "test units". In fact, Leman could have changed his mind, given the high casualties suffered by the 500th Battalion during the first battle. However, it was then that the first suspicions about the "possibility of a front-line test" crept in. Ojō M., who was a member of the "authorized personnel" of the battalion, recalled the summer of 1941 (then he was in Fulda): "The first wounded from the 500th battalion began to arrive from the front, so we had a real opportunity to learn about its use. We learned that the battalion had suffered huge losses near the village of Medyuka. The wounded were especially depressed by the fact that they heard nothing more about the past promises. I personally knew only one case. One former lieutenant, demoted for cowardice, received his rank back after he was wounded at the front.

He was lucky with the wound, and on the mend he was sent to Fulda. All the rest either died or, after being wounded, were again sent to the front-line battalion to continue the test.

Indeed, by December 1941, the 500th battalion had already participated in hostilities for half a year, but the "test" was never considered passed. The "subjects" were only informed that the relevant documents were being developed. Taking into account the possible return to the regular unit, it was necessary to proceed from a more than lengthy formulation: "If the soldier transferred to the test unit in the face of the enemy proved his fitness for service, then after the appropriate time he can be transferred to his unit or another

military unit.

Rumors about the mood in the 500th battalion, apparently, by September 1941 reached the High Command. This can explain the requirement to submit reports on the use of "test units" to the High Command of the Wehrmacht and the ground forces. At that moment, there was a real opportunity to prove that the military use of the 500th battalion existed not only on paper, but also contributed to

conquest of the USSR. Only taking into account all the facts stated above, it is possible to explain the words of Erich Lattmann.

In December 1941, more practical instructions on the problem of "testing" came into being. This followed from the first "pardon applications" for employees of the 540th battalion. The very first of these documents is dated December 26, 1941. Before we take a closer look at the essence of the "application for pardon", we must at least briefly describe the circumstances of the combat use of the 540th battalion. In November-December 1941, the Red Army fought fierce battles in the vicinity of Tikhvin, desperately trying to launch a successful counteroffensive in order to prevent the encirclement of Leningrad. During these battles, the Soviet side managed to recapture Tikhvin and push back the German troops behind the Volkhov. At the same time, the situation in the 18th Army of the Wehrmacht was so critical that it was urgently decided to reinforce it with the 540th Infantry Battalion, the formation of which was not completed and it essentially consisted of only two companies. At the same time, the High Command of the Ground Forces was forced to give up an important principle: to send to the front only fully equipped units that had a specific commander.

Both "test companies" (1-540 and 11-540) entered the battle immediately after arriving at the front - January 21, 1942. In fierce battles in the very first days, the companies lost half of their personnel. The High Command could be satisfied with passing the "test" and the opportunities that open up in connection with this. At the very least, the documents stated that "the soldiers being tested quite successfully redeemed themselves for their misdeeds."

In connection with these stubborn battles in the affairs of the 18th Army, there appeared "statements of pardon" for the employees of the second company of the 540th battalion, who were part of the 122nd Infantry Division. The first three cases concerned former non-commissioned officers: a murderer, a rapist and a robber. It is obvious that the course of the case was given only after the appearance on January 26, 1942 of the Fuhrer's decree "On pardon for those who passed the test during the war." The appendix to this decree, which came out of the depths of the High Command of the Ground Forces, said that in order to be pardoned, it was necessary to go through some kind of "redemptive" chain. Namely, full or partial release from punishment, conversion to a lighter punishment, imposition of a suspended sentence with a probationary period, cancellation of the decision to demote, removal of an entry from the penalty list, reinstatement as a regular soldier, rehabilitation and full restoration of rights. As a prerequisite for passing through such a chain, according to Hitler's Decree, the following circumstances should have been:

- 1) the punished person had to show exceptional courage, while being distinguished by exemplary behavior;

- 2) he had to unconditionally observe discipline for a long time.

Hans-Peter Klausz noted in his book that during the interviews, the former "test subjects" indicated that in practice there were no specific instructions for passing this "redeeming path". Horst Voit echoes these statements, emphasizing that even the company officers, who were given a central place in assessing the success of the "test", had no idea what and how to do. Someone believed that for a pardon it was enough to distinguish himself in the offensive or during reconnaissance. At the same time, the "memo" of the 560th battalion stated that the destruction of the tank should have been taken into account, but did not necessarily lead to a pardon. As a result, company commanders decided the issue of passing the "test" at their discretion. The "statement of pardon", as a rule, had to be sent upstairs by the company commander. In some cases, the "subjects" themselves or their relatives could come up with such an initiative. In these rare episodes, the company commander was required to make an appropriate conclusion and characterization. When, for example, the mother of one of the "subjects" filed a petition for pardon, the company commander gave a negative answer and a negative characterization. In his opinion, the soldier lacked discipline and the will to

passing the test. Even more humiliating was the decision of another company commander, who, in response to his father's request for pardon for his son, wrote: "Insufficient will to pass the test, undisciplined, lazy, extremely cowardly, unsuitable for fighting enemies."

When making his own verdict, the company commander was guided primarily by personal impressions that he made about the "test subject" from the battles. Then personal impressions were supplemented by the assessments that the company received from the respective squad and platoon commanders. Wilhelm Wicciok, when he was a non-commissioned officer in the 500th battalion, recalled: "The officers demanded a review of the corresponding soldier. We were asked: if he is left alone, what will he do? how often did he volunteer? is he reliable? etc. These assessments were received by the company commander, and then sent upstairs to the battalion. Another non-commissioned officer of the 500th battalion indicated that he and other squad leaders from time to time gave assessments to individual soldiers. In some battalions, a so-called points system was developed. In this regard, Herbert T., then a lieutenant in the 540th battalion, recalled: "A special system of points or points was created for the test. Points were awarded for courage, readiness for action, discipline. If a soldier committed a misconduct, then he was awarded a penalty point, and therefore, his stay in the battalion was extended.

If we look at the mentioned "applications for pardon" that concerned the soldiers of the second company of the 540th battalion, then we can come across the following formalized rating system, which was given by company commanders. In it, in particular, such assessments of the characteristic were listed: "outstanding courage", "distinctive courage", "optimal fighting courage". And one more thing: "primary military merits", "exciting military merits", "exemplary military merits". In ten out of thirteen cases, it was about the wounded and seriously wounded. Obviously, these soldiers were counting on the words of the Führer, who spoke about pardoning the seriously wounded and those who had military merit. Soldiers who did not have such merits, nevertheless, showed during their six months of stay at the front "awareness

his military duty, courage and excellent conduct.

In all these episodes, at least six weeks passed from the company commander's appeal to the order of the 18th Army command. But usually this period was 4-5 months. According to some company commanders, in some cases an opinion was required, made by the battalion commander and the appropriate judge, which was sent to the military court of the 18th Army, along with the necessary recommendations. At the same time, the mentioned terms of consideration applied only to the "probationary" soldiers and non-commissioned officers, whose alleged imprisonment did not exceed three years. With longer terms of imprisonment, as well as in cases of demoted officers, the decision to pardon had to be made by the commander-in-chief of this branch of the armed forces, and in some cases even personally by the Führer. However, the decision in Germany meant not only a delay in time (at least 4 weeks), but sometimes the possible loss of documents, which was inevitably associated with partisan attacks and air raids. For former sailors and pilots, such a delay was inevitable, since the decision to pardon them was invariably taken in the High Command of the Navy and the High Command of the Luftwaffe.



If we take into account the fact that already in the first days of the war, the 500th battalion lost half of its personnel, it becomes clear that few survived until the pardon. During the consideration of documents, the "subject" could simply die.

Information about this state of affairs had a very negative effect on the mood in the 500th "test unit". When a special "memo" was posted in Skierniewice on January 1, 1943, in which it was forbidden to discuss losses at the front, this was the result not only of fears, but of information coming from the front. At the same time, the officers of the infantry battalions for special purposes, however, like the officers of the division, were quite a few

concerned about creating real "test opportunities". This followed from the beliefs that one of the officers of the 550th battalion voiced after the war: "Only the prompt demonstration of fair pardons could once again stimulate the rest of the" test subjects "to be suitable for the front, as a result of which the combat capability and effectiveness of the 550th infantry battalion could again increase." Approximately the same thing was said in a letter from the commander of the 28th Jaeger Division, which was dated August 18, 1943: "With such high losses, it is no longer possible to process the cases of individual soldiers and register a separate test. A commander who is fully loaded with tactical questions of using his company in battle can hardly deal with the processing of this data on a daily basis, and even in those primitive conditions in which he is forced to live. I consider it necessary to single out an officer who would deal with these matters, and in the event of the death of a company commander, would take his place. This is the only way to guarantee that after the death of the company commander or other officers, there will be no interruptions in the processing of applications for pardon, and the "test subjects" will not be infringed on their rights."

However, such a proposal was not accepted. Due to the lack of personnel in the Wehrmacht, the 500th battalions were never reinforced by an officer. Nevertheless, even in the High Command of the Ground Forces, they were very concerned about improving the real situation of "reliable test subjects." In April 1942, the order was initially announced, which stated: "After passing the test in the fight against the enemy and the relevant evidence, transfer to the authorized personnel of the battalion or the previous military unit if it was in the same division." In practice, this meant that the distinguished "test subject" remained in his battalion, moving into the "statutory personnel". One of the reports on this matter stated: "In almost all cases of pardon, soldiers were transferred either to corps units or to the authorized personnel of the battalion." In the 550th battalion, some freedom of choice was even given. For example, one of the officers wrote: "After passing the test, they were given the opportunity to transfer to the normal unit; however, in some cases, the subjects felt so soldered to the battalion that they expressed a desire to transfer to the authorized personnel."

In principle, the pardon meant nothing. Often pardoned did not wait for him and died in battle. In the context of the steadily growing destruction of communications, the passage of documents through the authorities took longer and longer. As a result, by the spring of 1944, many indignant requests had accumulated in the documents of the 18th Army: "What caused such a long consideration of documents? The conclusion of the battalion commander was made on October 15, 1943, and the issue was resolved only on March 7, 1944! How should the convicts behave further? In turn, the command of the 18th Army sent similar requests to the legal department of the Supreme Command of the Ground Forces: "Due to the current situation on the fronts, the messages do not reach the addressees. As a result, pardons remain a kind of memory." The reaction to such difficulties was the "Fifth Order for the Execution of the Führer's Decree" of July 18, 1944. It proposed the following way out of the situation: "If a soldier has proved his suitability in the fight against the enemy, then in principle he must be transferred to the authorized personnel of the unit or put on allowance in another military unit. This can take place before the arrival of a pardon decision after the front has passed the

It is difficult to verify whether such a prescription led to real changes. In any case, the latest data on pardons in the 18th Army date back to May 1944. That in this

question, certain doubts are justified, indicate not only the reports of the former "test subjects", but also the soldiers of the "statutory personnel". Lieutenant Herbert T. at the beginning of 1943 was in the 540th battalion. At first he was a platoon leader, and then became

company commander. He recalled: "Back! only the wounded or the dead were sent, who were packed in coffins, nicknamed 'test boxes'. I remember only one test subject who was restored to his old part." Felix R. in 1951 stated on this topic: "Unfortunately, some of the earnest subjects never received rehabilitation. Why, despite good reviews and service life, which sometimes exceeded a year, there was no transfer to the old units, it remained to ask the command. And this question was asked quite often. Johann Fricke, who actually went through the entire war in the 500th battalion, himself answered the question of how many test subjects transferred to the old units: "From our company over the years, this has probably happened no more than ten times."

However, the real numbers were still not so small. According to the documents, more than 300 "test subjects" were rehabilitated in the 18th Army alone (this applied to the 540th and 561st battalions). Regarding the 500th battalion, only figures relating to the summer of 1943 are reliably known. So, for example, in June 1943, 31 "pardon applications" were filed, 13 previous applications were approved, and 9 rehabilitated employees were transferred to their native units. In July, the figures for these indicators look like this: 39-12-12, and in September: 30-7-4. In this case, one must proceed from the fact that the approved and agreed "statements of pardon" applied not only to the seriously wounded, but also to those "test subjects" who had long since died. Probably, in these cases there was no public announcement of the decision on pardon in front of the company. For the majority of the "test subjects", the news of the pardon of their comrade, who had been killed for a month, looked like a cynical joke, and not an act of mercy.

Before summing up some results regarding the beginning of the use of the 500th battalions and the conditions for pardon (as the Germans would say - modalities), it is necessary to answer the question: to what extent did the severity of the offense committed and the likelihood of his pardon correlate. For company commanders, apparently, this did not play any role. From the very beginning, it was indifferent to them whether the employee was a deserter, a "saboteur", a thief, a coward, or "an insane person in an incestuous relationship with a sister." Johann Fricke in conversations reported Mr. P. Klaus, that only those convicted of 8,175 were singled out separately: "The homosexuals were at the very bottom, they could hardly count on anything. They didn't care if they passed the test and got their military rank back." However, it was not without exceptions. In the 540th battalion, there was a former sergeant major, demoted for unnatural connections. Despite some tenderness and sensual predisposition, he tried at all costs to pass the "test". For this, he volunteered to be a shooter, an orderly, a scout, and a deputy squad leader. Moreover, he carried out the instructions exemplary and with zeal. However, the old title was returned to him when he drowned, voluntarily

volunteering to be connected.

In one case, when a young lieutenant died, who got into the battalions for "criminal debauchery with men", Field Marshal Keitel himself informed his parents about this in a letter (at that time he was the head of the Wehrmacht High Command). The letter said: "Your son gave his life fighting enemies for the Fuhrer, the people and the Fatherland. A heroic death atoned for his guilt. He fully restored his good name as an officer." It would seem that it was a formality, but the parents of the deceased could now count on a certain pension. So the posthumous restoration in the rank was not always an empty phrase.

Since the company commanders did not care about the past misconduct of the "probationers", the judges very often interfered in the matter of pardon. In some cases, they rejected the "application for clemency", replacing it with a motion to reduce the alleged prison term. In this case, the rest of the conclusion could be completely "worked out" through the passage of the next "test". Obviously, the chances of satisfying such a petition were very high. On this occasion, the High Command

ground forces wrote: "On the one hand, the amount of evidence for pardon and the rehabilitation itself depend on the severity of the offense committed, on the other hand, on military merit and the behavior of the punished employee. The more serious the offense, the higher the requirements for its expiation.

Of course, pardon decisions appeared much more often than death sentences were handed down. Quite often, the death sentences handed down by courts-martial were replaced by passing a new "special test". In this regard, one document can be quoted: "Taking into account the readiness of the convict to pass the test and the possibility of using him in the probationary unit, where he was sent on November 14, 1943, I apply for the commutation of the death penalty by 10 years in prison."

In the provisions on the application of the Fuhrer's decree of January 26, 1942, there are additional instructions: "In isolated cases, a pardon is allowed if the convicted person did not have a chance to show his courage and demonstrate exemplary behavior, but nevertheless proved his suitability for fighting the enemy for two years ". But if you look at the level of losses in the 500th battalions, then a two-year stay in them was tantamount to a death sentence. Although there were rare cases when survivors did receive rehabilitation. The commander of the 1st company of the 561st battalion wrote a statement about the "test subject", who was sentenced to 14 months in prison for unauthorized leaving of the unit: "I recommend removing the outstanding part of the punishment, since the convict, despite his mental limitations, turned out to be very suitable as a shooter and a soldier of eavesdropping post 3". Another case concerned a former chief lieutenant who, after being demoted, ended up in the 540th battalion: "Since the convict is not a paramount soldier, and, perhaps, he never will be, he is nevertheless forced to admit that he has shown himself well in recent battles. His long stay in the probationary battalion, his responsibility and courageous behavior serve as a justification for his pardon.

It follows from these examples that company commanders cared about the fair rehabilitation of even those soldiers who, with a big stretch, could be called "heroic personalities." The main thing is that he should show zeal for passing the "test". But the attitude towards the soldier changed radically if such zeal was not observed. So the "test" Benedict L., who ended up in the battalions for the "crossbow", was sentenced to death for stealing three chocolate bars: "Shooter Benedict L. was transferred to the fourth company on March 4, 1943, where he was second in the machine gun crew. The squad leader, Benedict L., was characterized as an obedient employee who was able to cope with any task. However, he began to show negligence, for which he was repeatedly reprimanded. The actions of Benedict L. have no logical explanation, since each employee received 650 grams of chocolate. So L. had every reason to be pleased. I consider Benedict L. to be an incorrigible man who, given a free hand, would again commit a crime. For this reason, I consider it necessary to deny Benedict L. a second chance to pass the test. The battalion commander added: "L. upon entering the battalion, he was informed in detail that he was required not only to participate in battles, but also to maintain discipline. He had already been given a chance to avoid the death penalty. But he didn't use it." As you can see, the classic principle of "carrot and stick" was practiced in the 500th battalions.

Summing up some results, it can be stated that when using battalions there were no specific instructions and directives on mitigation of punishment and rehabilitation in case of passing the "test". Obviously, at first it was supposed to look at the effectiveness of the 500th battalions, and then generalize the experience gained. The fact that these issues were less developed than the composition, armament, etc., is unambiguous

indicates the specific goals of the initiators of the creation of "test units". In the very first place were purely military interests: the possibility of intimidating soldiers from regular units, as well as the use of shock and penalty groups. Only after the battalions were "successfully" used in the battles against the Red Army, it became clear that the lack of a real mechanism

"tests", specific criteria for rehabilitation may prove harmful to the battalions and ultimately to the Wehrmacht itself. The officers quite rightly feared for the combat effectiveness of these formations. The number of survivors who received rehabilitation was relatively small. As a result, many of the "test subjects" lost the incentive to display heroism. In some cases, it came to the point of absurdity, which caused despair in the soldiers. As one of the battalion officers recalled after the war: "If during the fighting a unit lost its office along with the documents of the soldiers being tested, then they lost their last hope of improving their situation. If an officer died, then the soldiers lost a witness who could confirm that they really passed the "test".

## PART H

### Battalions in the heat of hostilities Chapter 1 Hot 1942

On February 24, 1942, the command of the 50th Army Corps, to which two companies of the 540th Battalion were assigned in early December 1941, received a telegram from the 18th Army. It said: "1) On February 25, the third and fourth companies of the 540th test battalion, the battalion headquarters, as well as 150 test soldiers for enrollment in the first and second companies of the 540th battalion, should be delivered to Krasnogvardeysk by rail. All of them are at the disposal of the command of the corps. 2) The High Command of the Ground Forces, taking into account the peculiarity of the 540th test battalion, proceeds from the fact that after its completion it will be used in accordance with the combat situation.

The 50th Army Corps formed the southern part of the siege ring, in which Leningrad was located. Hitler intended to destroy the city not only because of its military and economic importance, but also because of its symbolic role as the birthplace of the first socialist state. The 540th battalion got to this sector of the front already in March 1942. He was sent in a southeasterly direction, in order, together with the first army corps and the SS forces, to engage in the fight against the newly formed Second Shock Army. The strategic task of the Second Shock Army under the command of General Vlasov was to be a breakthrough of the blockade. Much has been written in Russian literature about the tragedy of the Second Shock Army in Myasnoy Bor. But how did the Germans look at this problem? In the book of Hartung Polman "Volkhov. 900 days of fighting for Leningrad", published in 1962, there are the following lines: "Having crossed the Volkhov, the Second Shock Army had to go deep into the forests along the gati that led from Novgorod to Chudovo, where it was not supposed to meet any German resistance. North of Luga, on the way from Yamburg to Narva, the Russians ran into the 18th Army, which was cut off from supplies ... After several reconnaissance battles, a battle began, which continued with varying degrees of intensity from January 13, 1942 until June 27, 1942 ... The winter battle for the Volkhov brought the 18th Army to the brink of disaster, which could only be compared with the defeat at Stalin

The German command planned to cut off the Soviet units that had escaped forward in the area between Novgorod and Chudovo, surround them, and then destroy them. At the same time, the 540th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion was introduced into the SS Police Division ("Wünnerberg Group"). This happened in April 1942. The battalion was to launch an offensive in Myasnoy Bor. It was here that the main fighting took place. The 540th battalion was to some extent relieve the rather battered "Combat Group West", which was also part of the SS police division. Later one of the officers

recalled the arrival of the battalion to this sector of the front: "The Russians daily attacked our southern positions. But they could not break further north. On Easter Sunday, April 5, the battle group was replaced by a Wehrmacht battalion. The group was sent north to the reserve. The Russians allegedly felt the appearance of a new unit and attacked from the southwest on April 6. They broke through the front and disrupted our life support system. The forces of the same battalion launched a counterattack. On the same day, the enemy was driven out of their positions. It should be noted the high efficiency of this battalion.

This message allows us to say that the 540th Infantry Battalion not only participated in fierce battles in the Volkhov cauldron, but also fully justified the fact of its existence (from the point of view of the National Socialist leadership). This was noted on April 28, 1942 in the combat log of the 1st Army Corps. At that time, the position of the "Wunnenberg group" was still considered "very serious", and therefore "very critical": "The attack of the 540th battalion, with one of its own wounded, led to the death of 40 Russians." Until the end of the fighting, which ended in June 1942 with the encirclement of the Second Shock Army, the battalion suffered significant losses. On June 23, 1942, the combat log of the 18th Army stated: "The test battalion has been temporarily withdrawn from the front, since it was completely destroyed during the last hardest battles. To carry out subsequent tasks, it must be replenished with fresh forces. In the same June 1942, about 410 "test soldiers" were sent to the 540th battalion, who were immediately thrown into action. However, high losses were typical not only for the 540th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion. In other military units that participated in solving the same "fateful issue", the losses were no less, and in some cases even higher. The specifics of the use of special purpose battalions are revealed only when a longer period is considered. This follows from a letter that the command of the 18th Army on June 10, 1942 addressed to the High Command of the Ground Forces: "The test battalion must be in the center of hostilities so that the soldiers have the opportunity to pass the test of fighting the enemy. However, the constant stay at the forefront of the struggle implies a constant change of victorious divisions. From the army's point of view, it will not be possible to prevent a change in the tactical reassignment of the battalion. In order to avoid judicial and disciplinary subordination, the battalion should be directly subordinate to the 1st Army Corps.

In other words, the 500th battalions were to be "tested" where, for the most part, only "elite formations" operated - in the so-called focus of the war. The fundamental difference was that after the end of a fierce war, these elite units were withdrawn from the front for rest and replenishment, and the 500th battalions rushed to the next hot sector. That is, service in the 500th battalions was reduced to an endless series of bloody battles. This practice involved a frequent change of units in which the battalion was supposed to be listed. It was this problem that was discussed in the letter cited above. The use of the 540th battalion proceeded in strict accordance with the described scheme. After the end of the Battle of Volkhov, the command of the 1st Army Corps did not intend to conduct major operations. For this reason, the 540th battalion was transferred to the 61st Infantry Division to participate in Operation Ingeborg. The war diary reported about her: "And August 1942: the 61st division begins Operation Ingeborg. The 540th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion is trying to settle matters in the southern sector of the Vodose bridgehead. Since the attack did not turn out to be unexpected, and the enemy defense is only getting stronger, permission was given to stop the operation ... In the afternoon, the commander of the 540th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion stops the Ingeborg operation. Although the operation was generally successful, the battalion commander believes that it is necessary to withdraw the shock platoon, since it is not strong enough, and retake these positions the next night. But a little later, on August 16, 1942, we could find the 540th battalion on the march

in Gruzino to change the battalion of the 162nd Infantry Regiment there. There is one special circumstance connected with this episode. Gruzino was the only tiny bridgehead that the 18th Army had on the eastern bank of the Volkhov. Already in January 1942, the command of the 39th Army Corps characterized the situation there as follows: "The center of our position is Chudovo with Gruzino located on the opposite bank, which, oddly enough, has not yet been recaptured by the Russians. Their first attempt was drowned in blood." The following excerpt from a document of the command of the 18th Army, dated March 30, 1942, shows how feared German soldiers were at the Gruzino bridgehead: "General Kleffel reports on the situation at the Gruzino bridgehead: our grouping in a tight patch is an excellent target for enemy artillery and aviation. The units see no reason to hold this piece of land. There are rumors among the soldiers that the bridgehead should be held only until the thaw, they say, there is a new order from the Fuhrer for this.

This more or less "lost foothold" was an ideal place for the 540th Battalion to use. On August 16, 1942, the commander of the 18th Army reported to Army Group North: "The Gruzino bridgehead is occupied by the first company of the 540th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion. In calmer times, this occupation would be quite enough, but not in the face of increased Russian attacks. In this situation, we must come to terms with the loss of Gruzino. I have no more reserves, no desire to attack." On this patch, more than 300 people from the 540th battalion were "written off" from the accounts. Until the end of 1942, the battalion was repeatedly replenished and restored to its full strength, thanks to which it was still possible to keep Gruzino. On December 2, 1942, the command of the 1st Army Corps formed the following opinion about the battalion: "The test soldiers sent to the battalion show an unconditional will to pass the test by 75%. Which, in fact, confirmed that the mechanism for selecting soldiers for battalions and the style of leadership justified themselves.

On January 22, 1943, the 540th battalion was unexpectedly recalled from the bridgehead in Gruzino. To understand the meaning of everything that happened, let's look at the situation on the fronts. On January 12, 1943, the Red Army made another attempt to unblock Leningrad. The essence of the operation was to break through the German units in the area of Lake Ladoga and start supplying Leningrad along a dirt road. Like all other operations to break the blockade, this offensive was aimed primarily at capturing the Sinyavinsky Heights, located 50 kilometers southeast of Leningrad. Sinyavino was of great strategic importance. The one who controlled this area could conduct artillery fire on all the surroundings. The fierce struggle for the Sinyavino Heights, which lasted for three years, was somewhat reminiscent of the First World War on the Franco-German front. Like the battle of Verdun, artillery was actively used there. After the united Leningrad units managed to break through the German front on the Neva, just south of Shlisselburg, in mid-January 1943, the Soviet troops again attempted to occupy the Sinyavin Heights. Under these conditions, the commander of the 18th Army gave an order to the commander of the SS police division: "According to the order of the Fuhrer, Lieutenant General Wünnenberg is personally responsible for holding the height in Sinyavino." To carry out this task, about 700 people from the 540th battalion were sent to the heights, which on January 26, 1943 was introduced into the "Hilpert group". About the battles of the battalion at these heights, the combat log of the 18th Army reported the following: "On the left flank of the 43rd Grenadier Regiment, from midnight to 10 a.m., ten enemy attacks were made by the battalion with fire artillery support. Risking the last reserves, a counterattack was launched. Part of the arrived test battalion was immediately thrown into reinforcement. During the night, the battalion repulsed eight enemy attacks.

On January 29, 1943, after a powerful artillery preparation with enhanced air support, the Red Army again tried to recapture the Sinyavinsky Heights. This time the attack was

tanks launched. The severity of the blow fell on a forest area, just east of Gorodok. The 540th battalion held exactly this sector of the front. At 3:35 p.m., a message came from the "Hilpert group": "All attacks on the Sinyavin Heights have been repulsed ... All attacks on the 45th Grenadier Regiment and the 540th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion have also been repulsed ... After massive artillery preparation, a bloody battle is underway. Launched a lot of tanks and infantry. We managed to repulse all attacks. The next day at 10:55 it was reported: "With strong artillery support, the Russians continue to attack ... The personnel suffer huge losses. The commander of the 21st Infantry Division reports that he has only 500 men left holding a five-kilometer-wide front. 100 people remained from the test battalion. On January 31, 1943, the commander of the 18th Army reported to Army Group North: "A swift attack at 3 am. The former positions are in our hands. The former front line has been restored... The test battalion fought excellently. Nearly the entire staff was killed." Just the day before, Colonel von Krone from the 1st Army Corps asked to convey gratitude to "the guys from the battalion, who are outstanding warriors."

Let's leave the 540th battalion for now. And let's see how things went for the 500th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion. Recall that this formation was part of the 101st Jaeger Division, which in the first half of 1942 fought heavy battles in the Donbass, intending to break into the Caucasus, and

Namely, go to the Tuapse area. In this case, the High Command did not need to change the subordination of the battalion in order to send it into the thick of the war. The 101st Jaeger Division, as an integral part of the 17th Army, was the same military formation that was constantly on the hot sectors of the front. As a result, this was expressed both in the losses of the 101st division itself and the 500th infantry battalion. Looking ahead, we can say that at the end of October 1942, only 800 people remained in the division. According to other sources, in 1942, more than 1,600 people were killed in the 500th battalion, taking into account the arriving reserves. The battalion itself was used for a variety of tasks: for attacks and their reflection, to fight partisans and to cover retreats. Here are just a few extracts from the combat log of the 101st Jaeger Division.

September 27, 1942. 11 o'clock. The second company of the 500th infantry battalion broke through the enemy positions and reached Mirnaya... The division commander personally led the company's attack.

October 24, 1942. Major Pinchovius ("reports: in a fierce battle a retaliatory blow was struck. The first company advanced 490 meters ... The situation is changing for the better. The general orders to establish contact between the third company of the 229th battalion and the 540th battalion. Major Pinchovius is moving south, to release the second company 21 hours 40 minutes The 500th battalion reports that the goal has been reached.

October 25, 1942. 20 hours. Powerful enemy attack from the north to Saray Gora. 22 hours 45 minutes. Major Pinchovius reports by radio to the division commander that superior enemy forces managed to capture Sarai Gora. There should be the 213th engineer battalion, which, apparently, was completely destroyed by the enemy. Heights give dominance. Major Pinchovius fears that with the loss of Sarai Gora his forces will be shackled... The situation is catastrophic. The division commander gives the order to leave the position. During the retreat, due to darkness, the second company of the 500th battalion lost its way.

October 26, 1942. 14 hours. The company, in the most unprecedented way, made its way through the enemy positions and connected with the remnants of the battalion. During the breakthrough, 50 to 60 enemy soldiers were destroyed.

In the order for the part dated February 2, 1943, the commander of the 101st Jaeger Division issued a special thanks and expressed special gratitude to the third company of the 500th battalion "for skillful and courageous actions." This company managed to win back one of the collective farms, which was abandoned by units of the 125th Infantry Division. A week later, another order was announced for the unit. "February 8, last night, the unit managed to successfully repulse the attack. especially necessary

highlight the actions of the soldiers of the 9th Romanian cavalry regiment and the 500th battalion who neglected death. Captain Morigl, commander of the second company of the 500th battalion, distinguished himself by his skillful leadership.

At that time, the 17th Army, including the 101st Jaeger Division, showed signs of "moral decay", which primarily concerned the foreign units of the Wehrmacht. On December 11, 1942, a Georgian company, commanded by a former Soviet senior lieutenant, left the position. On December 23, 1942, 28 soldiers from the 781st Turkish battalion fled from the front line. The next day, Turkish defectors told Soviet intelligence about the size and strength of the German formations. On January 19, 1943, the German units, due to unreliability, disarmed the Turkish battalion. From the infantry, he was retrained in the construction. Something similar happened in the 500th battalion, but still it was considered a reliable reserve, and therefore in January 1943 was again sent to the front line.

Now let's see how things were in the 550th battalion. On March 17, 1942, the 550th battalion fell into the 205th infantry division, which occupied positions south of Velizh. The division headquarters was located in Belyaev. The 550th test battalion, which was at the direct disposal of the command of the 3rd Panzer Army, was to fight in the central part of the Eastern Front. Already on March 15, 1942, the command of the 59th Army Corps reported to

headquarters of the 3rd Panzer Army on the intended use of the battalion. To the east of the Duna river was the Kamensky forest. It was from the forest in the vicinity of Kamenka that the Soviet units repeatedly attacked the road leading from Belyaev to Velizh, which jeopardized the supply of German units. The battalion was to smash these detachments of the Red Army and "clear" the forest. The employees of the 550th battalion, who had virtually no experience before, were faced with a difficult and very risky task.

When planning an offensive operation, consultations took place between the headquarters of the 205th Infantry Division and the 59th Army Corps. In the course of this planning, on March 19, 1942, the military came to the conclusion that the capture of the forest was a very real task. When, after some delay, on March 22, 1942, the German offensive operation began, it became clear that the positions of the Red Army had long since changed. As a result, the forest was occupied with much greater losses than expected. To carry out Operation Kamenka, five companies of the 550th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion were divided into two groups, which were supposed to penetrate the forest from two sides: from the southwest and northwest. The execution of the operation was entrusted to Colonel Dormagen, commander of the 335th Infantry Regiment. He left two platoons as flanking cover. In addition, the 550th battalion was reinforced with several sappers, four tanks, anti-tank and infantry guns. But already in the very first hours of the operation, it turned out that heavy guns could not move through deep snow, and therefore their use was pointless. Ahead of the battalion were waiting for a few more "surprises". On the eve of the operation, aviation was supposed to launch an air strike on the forest in order to weaken the Soviet units and, if possible, disrupt communication between them. But shortly before the scheduled bombardment, the 205th Infantry Regiment learned that the planned air strike would not take place. "To the counter question posed why this sudden, unexpected and extremely undesirable change of plans occurred, in response from the flight corps they reported that the bombing should be carried out only on specific targets, and in this situation no specific coordinates were indicated ... The division command expresses indignant bewilderment, since the units that were counting on air support will now suffer huge losses.

As a result, the pilots made several runs over the forest, but the bombardment was not massive, but rather symbolic. As a result, the operation plan was decided not to be abandoned.

As you can see, the first combat operation for the 550th battalion took place in the most unfavorable conditions. Let's turn to the combat log of the 205th Infantry Division.

March 22, 1942. Attack on the Kamensky forest. 4 hours 30 minutes. Fire training. 4 hours 40 minutes. Both groups are ready to attack. 6 hours 16 minutes. Major Petsshmani 51 reports: anti-tank guns and vehicles will not be able to advance due to deep snow. The battalion continues to advance. 6 hours 20 minutes. Major Petzschmann reports. at the moment the progress is very slow. Rifle and machine-gun fire is being conducted. From time to time, grenades are launched. A German spy is in the sky. 6 hours 28 minutes. Major Petzschmann reports. in the course of the offensive, the enemy defenses are systematically broken through.

There were no messages in the following hours. In his memoirs, Heinz Helms pointed out the possible reasons for this: "The temperature was about minus 30. In addition, a large amount of snow fell. Our unit was at first making good progress through the wooded area, when suddenly it was fired upon from all sides. Russian soldiers came to our rear. They hid in special snow shelters, letting us go ahead. Our colleagues, instead of firing back, tried to move forward. Our battalion suffered heavy losses." The Red Army soldiers, invisible to the German soldiers, hid not only in snow shelters, but also behind the trees, which in those places were uniform thickets. They opened heavy fire on the 550th battalion, which was stuck in the snow. One of the lieutenants who took part in this operation described the chaos in the Kamensky Forest as follows: "We suffered losses even because we were fired upon by our own artillery." Signalmen were the first to be killed, who kept in touch between the battalion headquarters of Major Petzschmann and the advancing companies. This was precisely the reason that Colonel Dormagen somewhat



hours knew nothing about the progress of the operation. As a result, the death of signalmen led to the fact that communication between individual companies was lost. Having lost officers and almost the entire command staff, the attackers found themselves in an actual encirclement, the threat came from all sides. To this were added the shells of the German artillery, the fire support of which was already too weak. But now they were bursting among the advancing German soldiers. The commander of the two platoons assigned to cover reported: "At the beginning of the fire support in the northern direction, there was no feeling that the shelling hit enemy targets. Even if such weak fire was justified by the lack of ammunition, the actions of the gunners still caused disappointment ... The fact that they hit their own units turned out to be doubly depressing.

By noon on March 22, 1942, reports began to come in again to Colonel Dormagen. He immediately began to transfer them to the headquarters of the 205th Infantry Division.

"11 hours 55 minutes. Colonel Dormagen: The companies of Raak and Staunau, while moving south and southeast, faced powerful enemy defenses. They step back. 13 hours 5 minutes. Colonel Dormagen: The companies of Grossmann and Staunau came under heavy enemy fire. They retreat back to the heights. There are huge losses in Raak's company / All officers of the battalion are either wounded or killed. Fire is fired from behind every tree. The snow is deep, chest deep. Major Petzschmann allegedly gave the order to withdraw to the Upper Cleavers. Colonel Dormagen gives the opposite order: the battalion remains in the occupied territory and takes up all-round defense. This order, apparently, did not reach the commander of the 550th battalion, since further in the log of painful actions it appears: "13 hours 50 minutes. Colonel Dormagen: Major Petzschmann with the remnants of the northern group withdrew to the Upper Cleavers without permission. High losses. 17 hours. Colonel Dormagen and Oberleutnant Lenz established that the northern group had completely abandoned the forest. The losses are huge. The current composition of the 1st company is 1/7/62 (officers / non-commissioned officers / soldiers), the 2nd company is 1/8/52.5th company-0/4/30.

19 hours 15 minutes. Colonel Dormagen. enemy forces taking part in the counterattack on the southern group are estimated at 400-600 people. Own losses: Kelbas company 181 - 12 dead, 26 wounded, 7 missing. Company Borea - 3 dead, 8 wounded. The current composition of the Borea company is 1/11/56. The composition of the Kelbasi company is 1/10/90.

19 hours 40 minutes. The chief of staff of the 59th Army Corps is informed of the complete failure of the offensive. The impression of the battalion and its condition: the commander is in a state of shock, the adjutant refuses to act, all the officers died. In the next two days, the battalion is not taken into account.

It follows from published reports that on March 22, 1942, the 550th battalion lost almost half of its combat strength. The survivors were so shocked or apathetic that there was no question of sending them back to the Kamensky Forest. When the shelling of German positions from Soviet mortars began, almost all the "test soldiers" fell into cover in a panic. They were completely demoralized. Then the battalion commander explained to the commander of the 3rd Panzer Army that "the battalion has ceased to be a combat unit, and this malfunction must be eliminated as soon as possible."

In view of the objective difficulties in carrying out the Kamenka operation, and also taking into account the insufficient training that did not depend on the 550th battalion, no harsh measures were taken against its leadership. However, the command of the division and the army had the strong impression that the battalion was not quite suitable for use on the hot sectors of the front. Adjutant Colonel Dormagen adhered to just such a point of view: "People as a whole turned out to be tolerable, although there were some individual simulators. It is surprising that the soldiers of the battalion did not suffer severe punishment for leaving their positions without permission. However, most of them resolutely attacked. Some even shouted "Hurrah!" The Russians, remaining invisible, fired at them from all sides with machine guns, machine guns and mortars. Some of the Russians climbed trees to fire."

The message from a lieutenant who had been detached from the 205th Infantry Division to assist the commander in conducting anti-tank defense sounded more negative notes: "When the battalion commander loudly called for an attack, most of the soldiers did not even think to carry out this order. When a messenger was needed, no one approached him. In my opinion, these people were malingerers or cowards. Therefore, they did not bother to deliver the message to the place. Therefore, there was no communication and interaction between the individual groups. According to my observations, it was because of this that confusion arose ... I estimate the number of soldiers who did not participate in the battle at all as two-thirds of the personnel. On the contrary, the combatants behaved very bravely. In front, they often dragged ammunition and even machine guns. However, none of them left their positions. At the same time, I saw groups of soldiers who were hiding in craters and ravines. Many, long before the retreat was announced, hid from the battlefield and fled to the Cleavers. In battle, there was no leadership that could gather together all the forces and throw them forward. I got the impression that the offensive failed: 1) because of the cowardice of the battalion soldiers; 2) due to insufficient cooperation of individual groups.

Probably, there was a certain percentage of people in the battalion who did not intend to part with life in Kamenka, far from their homeland. Their actions have been well described above. But given the terrible reality, it can be assumed that the state of shock in which most of the soldiers found themselves would be the lot of other regular units that found themselves in a similar situation. However, the opinion of the Lieutenant, who was awarded the Iron Cross, was given more attention. Moreover, it allowed the command of the 205th division and the 59th army corps to avoid punishment for insufficient study of the operation.

The commander of the 59th Army Corps, General Kurt von Schevalleri, irritably reported that he really intended to put the 550th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion into action as soon as possible. However, he intended to capture a farm on the western bank of the Duna River, which was located just opposite the Upper Cleavers. The capture of this bridgehead would allow control of the surrounding territories on the eastern coast. It was from here that the Soviet troops fired mortars and artillery on the territory of the Kamensky Forest, which largely determined the outcome of the struggle for the thicket. On March 27, three reconnaissance squads from the 550th battalion were supposed to be sent to this farm. After massive artillery preparation, they were to capture the farm. It is noteworthy that the previous sorties of German intelligence officers ended in complete failure. After a failure in the forest, it was decided to complete at least this task. The day before this operation was carried out, General Kurt von Schevalleri stated: "Given the specifics of the 550th battalion, it is necessary to equip the officers with machine guns and automatic weapons so that they walk behind the soldiers and shoot cowards." Well, why not defensive detachments?! And these were not empty words. In fact, well-armed special police squads were created from the "statutory personnel", which, together with the officers, followed the advancing 550th battalion. They were given the task of preventing "all attempts to escape from the front line" by any means. The German Wehrmacht decided to resort to means that were characterized in Nazi propaganda as "the methods of the Bolshevik commissars."

The attack started off well. Then the message came: "The mood is excellent. Nothing is known about simulators. Soviet troops immediately made an attempt to recapture the collective farm. The counterattack resulted in high German casualties. "At the beginning of the offensive, the combat forces were 4/31/210. On March 28, they were reduced to 3/18/103." All day the 550th battalion held the defense in the collective farm and the neighboring village of Boloshki. Despite the losses, the battalion commander reported on the cheerful mood of the "test soldiers". They show a firm will to keep the collective farm." On April 6, 1942, the fighting in the area seemed to subside. But four days later they began with renewed vigor.

April 10, 1942. 4 hours 30 minutes. The enemy in the amount of 50 people again attacked Boloshki from the north. He managed to recapture the last houses. A counterattack was launched, which allowed the Russians to be driven out of these houses. During the counterattack, Major Petzschmann was killed, command was transferred to Lieutenant Werner.

April 11, 1942. The attention of the battalion was mostly riveted on Boloshki, when around midnight the enemy penetrated the collective farm. Penetrating from the southwest, the enemy struck at the collective farm buildings. For about two hours they were bombarded with grenades. He managed to advance on the right flank. Despite the barrage of artillery fire, nothing could be done. The division knew about the moral instability of this battalion, its exhaustion, which was caused by insufficient combat experience. However, despite all this, he was not replenished with fresh forces. It was supposed to send reinforcements, but this was not required.

Despite the fact that the Red Army soldiers were driven out of the collective farm, the 550th battalion enjoyed a dubious reputation in the 205th Infantry Division. This was facilitated by the report of an artillery officer, who took from Boloshka the impression that Major Petzschmann was "no doubt too good-natured", while the soldiers, with rare exceptions, were "indifferent to the tasks assigned." Most likely, the soldiers of the 550th battalion have already said goodbye to life after 75% of the combat personnel were killed or wounded in two weeks. However, even against the backdrop of such events, negative assessments of the ability of the 550th battalion were largely biased and not very objective. They were dictated by a number of prejudices. Nevertheless, the commander of the 205th Infantry Division on May 25, 1942, during an inspection of the battalion, noted that "the unit made a favorable impression."

On June 29, 1942, 560 people arrived in Vitebsk to replenish the battalion. Some time before this, the new commander of the 550th battalion, Major Barge, arrived there. He had a reputation for being sharp-tongued. In Germany, they say about such people: "He has hair on his teeth." At that moment, the 550th battalion, together with the 205th infantry division, was transferred to Velizh. The replenished battalion was supposed to hold a section of the front along with the 368th Infantry Regiment. OScho M., at that time one of the newcomers, recalled after the war: "The battalion was located on the right bank of the Dune, occupying the small villages of Upper and Lower Krasnoe. From the right and left flanks were Russian units. After unloading in Vitebsk, a forced march awaited us. Already during the march, we got the first idea of what awaited us ahead, since due to direct hits from Russian artillery, we had the first dead and wounded. After a tiring march, sweaty and dirty, we reached the front line, where we were divided into companies.

Just at the moment when the battalion was replenished with fresh forces, which, as follows from the cover letter of Major Hünerbrein, "for the most part were not yet ready for use in the field", when the division into companies was going on, the Red Army launched a tank attack. Apparently, Soviet intelligence learned about the replenishment of the battalion with newcomers.

First, 21 Soviet tanks appeared on a front section 400 meters wide, which was just held by the 550th battalion. They immediately broke through the front line (later the commander of the third company would be blamed for this). At the cost of incredible efforts and huge losses, the battalion still managed to correct the situation. In one day, the battalion lost 80 people, and the Red Army lost eight tanks. Major Barge hastened to immediately draw organizational conclusions: "Assessment of morale: where there were young, energetic and enterprising commanders, as, for example, in the 1st company, capable of controlling soldiers, they bypassed the tanks from the side and occupied new positions, returning to old ones as soon as these tanks were knocked out. The Russian infantry accompanying the tanks was destroyed by active defensive fire. Tanks that broke through the defense line were blown up by fans. In addition, most of the 3rd platoon of the 2nd company launched a counterattack, which they successfully carried out. However, the company commander and many squad leaders were too timid. With regard to the simulators and those who cowardly left their positions, I will conduct the strictest investigation and take appropriate measures ... General impression. Despite fresh recruits and a problematic mouth structure, where they have strict leadership, the task is up to the mark. It is necessary to carry out educational work and special training." The headquarters of the 59th Army Corps approved the idea of cooperation between the 550th battalion and anti-tank units, which was supposed to reduce the success of the Red Army's tank attacks. Over the next few months, the 550th battalion made several successful operations. On October 18, 1942, in the combat log of the 205th division, we find an entry: "In order to inspect positions on the collective farm, the division commander personally visited this sector of the front. The composition of t

very good impression. The general said that each message should contain the words: "I have orders to hold these positions under any circumstances," so that the will to defend will enter the flesh and blood of every soldier.

On November 7, 1942, during a swift night attack by the Soviet penal battalions, the 550th battalion managed to achieve some success, for which gratitude was expressed from the division commander. Heinz Helms, who took part in this counterattack, recalled these terrible events as follows: "The Russians broke into us at night. There was only one old foundation pit, where we lay down 50 meters from the Russians. We could see them waving their arms to keep warm. We lay all night in this pit and only in the morning launched a counterattack. The Russians did not count on this. It was then that I understood how artillery should operate correctly. The gunners knew exactly our former location.

Every shot hit our former positions occupied by the Russians. When the Russians started to run, we stepped in. The fire was transferred. It was a terrible picture. Then I got a splinter in the side. Lying in the pit, I made a vow: if I survive, then when I return home, I will go to church every Sunday.

The result of this battle was contained in a message dated November 7, 1942: "During the morning enemy attack, the 550th grenadier battalion immediately launched a counteroffensive. The enemy suffered huge losses. From what was found: 144 dead, 26 taken prisoner, 2 machine guns, 41 grenades and a large number of rifles.

In subsequent, quieter months, the 550th battalion carried out several successful offensive operations near Velizh. For this, he earned the gratitude of the commander of the 83rd Infantry Division. In the combat log we could read:

"January 22, 1943. In the area of Boloshka, the forces of the strike group from the 550th battalion, despite enemy fire, destroyed a long-term firing point with ten enemy soldiers.

February 2, 1943. The reconnaissance platoon of the 1st company of the 550th battalion destroyed an enemy bunker early in the morning in the forest near the collective farm. At the same time, 10 Russians were killed and the language was taken ... The reconnaissance platoons of the 1st and 2nd companies of the 550th battalion received 200 g each as an encouragement chocolate per person.

March 7, 1943. The division commander in his order expresses gratitude to the 550th battalion, which participated in the offensive operation.

These estimates indicate only one thing - in the 83rd division, the 550th battalion was considered as a completely reliable "test unit". The practice of special police outfits was discontinued from the second half of 1942.

In early February 1943, the High Command of the Ground Forces had the first "Report on the activities of the 560th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion", which summarized some experience in the actions of this formation. Recall that at the end of 1942, the 560th battalion was transferred to the southern sector of the Eastern Front. Although in such a short time of hostilities with the participation of "test battalions" it was hardly possible to form a complete picture, their overall assessment can generally be called positive. Major Salzer reported: "On December 27, 1942, the battalion was introduced into the 6th Romanian cavalry division, based three kilometers south of Ilinskaya. Numerous reconnaissance groups, after a short time, were able to provide the headquarters of the Romanian division with information about the exact location of the enemy. The division, relying on this information, successfully carried out an offensive operation. When repulsing the offensive of powerful enemy strike groups, which was accompanied by strong artillery support, the battalion especially distinguished itself. This confirms the gratitude of the commander of the 97th Jaeger Division, Major General Rupp. The attitude of the subjects with their commanders and non-commissioned officers is correct, in a soldierly comradely way. Separate "incorrigible", from

which will be removed soon. From the ranks of the battalion they will be sent to special field battalions. Most of the "test subjects" show a genuine will to pass the test, which is expressed in a voluntary desire to join strike or reconnaissance groups. Company commanders were even able to put "test subjects" in some command posts. Groups formed in this way stand out for their daring, reckless courage in reconnaissance, but they are especially distinguished when repelling enemy attacks.

On the basis of such reports and on his own experience gleaned during visits to the battalions, one of the generals on this report was given a resolution: "So far, very good reviews!" The reinforcement of the 500th battalions with infantry and anti-tank guns, begun on January 24, 1943, can be seen as a result of this

report, and therefore, the recognition by the top leadership of the Wehrmacht of the 500th "test units".  
Chapter 2 The Bloody Retreat of 1943-1944

The 56th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion remained on the southern sector of the Eastern Front, taking into account short breaks, for more than a year and a half. At this time, he was assigned to the 97th Jaeger Division. These relations developed similarly to those of the 500th Battalion and the 101st Jaeger Division. The 97th Jaeger Division was one of the most effective units of the 17th Army (starting from October of the 6th Army). In both cases one could speak of good relations between the division command and the battalion commander. Sometimes both test battalions even fought on the same sector of the front.

The first severe test awaited the 560th battalion in February 1943, when, during the retreat to the Kuban bridgehead, he received an order to take the Yastrebovskoye place, and then participate in the capture of Berezhnoye. The commander of the battalion reported on the then struggle: "In heavy street battles, fierce hand-to-hand skirmishes, despite the losses, by 7 o'clock in the morning the place completely passed into our hands. In places of fighting, we counted 431 dead Russians. We found another 150 corpses directly east of Yastrebovsky. The unit then received an order to advance on

Berezhnoy. The 3rd reinforced company, after establishing contact with the strike group attacking from the south, managed, despite losses, to penetrate into the northern part of Berezhnoye and repulse, together with the 2nd company, all subsequent Russian attacks that were made from the south and southeast ... Commander The 97th Jaeger Division, General "Lieutenant Rupp, repeatedly expressed gratitude to the battalion for military successes and excellent behavior. The combat readiness and behavior of the tested soldiers, with the exception of certain identified asocial elements, can be described as excellent. The test subjects fought well both defensively and offensively, some performed heroic deeds."

In the combat log of the 97th Jaeger Division, about the then battles, it appears:

March 1, 1943. Major Salzer: today's casualty report. Wounded 1st

and the 3rd company managed to be taken out of the battlefield. The combat strength of the battalion is 250 people. The battalion fought exclusively, each man fought like a lion. Gratitude is expressed for the struggle against superior enemy forces.

Over the following months, the 560th battalion covered the withdrawal of the 97th division to the Kuban bridgehead, from where the German units were driven out in September 1943. During these battles, the 560th battalion was assigned approximately the same tasks as the other parts of the division. In some operations, individual divisional formations even came under the command of Major Salzer. When reading the combat log, one does not leave the impression that it is exactly like the combat log of the 101st Jaeger Division, which reported on the 500th battalion. In both cases, the battalions received very similar orders: offensive operations, retreat cover. They were constantly on the most difficult sectors of the front. The main difference from regular units was the frequency and timing of the use of battalions in critical areas. How it looked in practice

can be reconstructed by comparing the losses in battalions and formations of jaeger divisions in the period from April to August 1943. If you look at the information about the losses, we will see that from April 3 to August 28, 1943, the 560th battalion lost 954 people. But how were things in the Jaeger battalions? It turned out that during this period the average Jaeger battalion lost about 551 people. As you can see, the losses in the test battalion were much higher. They made up about 73% of the combat strength.

Staying until June 1944 as part of the 97th Jaeger Division, the 56th battalion suffered heavy losses during the retreat from the Crimea at the Nikopol bridgehead (October 1943). In April 1943, he ended up on the western bank of the Dniester near Tiraspol. It makes no sense to describe the details of these military operations, since they are very similar to each other. It is noteworthy that after long battles associated with heavy losses, the then battalion commander gave the following assessment of his condition: "The mood in the battalion is very good." And this is in conditions when the formation was short of 586 people, and the combat strength as of July 1, 1944 was limited to 406 people.

At the end of July 1944, the 560th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion was finally withdrawn from the 97th Jaeger Division. The reason for this decision will become obvious if you get acquainted with the opinion of the Red Cross investigative team, which dealt with the fate of the missing German soldiers: Bobruisk. At the same time, Army Group South occupied a defensive line between Kovel and 120 kilometers southeast of Brest-Litovsk and the Polish-Romanian border at Chernivtsi. In order to contain the advance of the enemy in the direction of Warsaw, already in early July, German units, including the 560th Special Purpose Grenadier Battalion, occupied a sector 65 kilometers northwest of Brest. In mid-July, German units in the Brest-Litovsk region came under a Soviet tank offensive. The Red Army managed to cross the Bug. The defeated units retreated from Brest to the Bilsk region. 7 Soviet units penetrated Bilsk from the north and cut off the German units' path to the west. When trying to break through to the west in the direction of Warsaw, the 560th Special Purpose Battalion in the Cheremkhi region, which lies 55 kilometers northwest of Brest, entered into bloody battles. Suffering huge losses, the remnants of the battalion managed to break through to the south-west of Cheremkha, where on July 22 they reached the Volokovysk-Siedlitz railway line. Only a few managed to reach the outskirts of Warsaw, where they again had to join the battle.

On August 13, 1944, that is, almost two weeks after the start of the Warsaw Uprising, the command of the 9th Army ordered the remnants of the 560th and 500th battalions to be sent from Skierniewice to Warsaw, where a new "test unit" was to be formed from them. ". Three weeks later, on 3 September 1944, the new 56th Battalion was ready for use. From now on, he was listed in the Army Group Center, in which, during the fierce battles on the Eastern Front, the 500th battalion "proved itself well."

After the front held by the Center group was broken through by the Red Army, the Soviet units reached the Vistula already in August 1944. At that time, they even managed to cross the river just northwest of Radom and in the Sandomierz region. The 9th Army was located on the sides of the Polish capital, in which, meanwhile, an uprising was raging. At that time, the German defensive line ran south of Warsaw along the western bank of the Vistula. To the north of Warsaw, the 4th SS Panzer Corps and the 19th Panzer Division were located, which hardly controlled the territories just east of the Vistula, in the area of its confluence with the Bug. It was in this area that the battalion was placed at the disposal of the SS Viking division. In the history of this SS unit, written after the war by a West German researcher, the following lines appeared: "After crushing artillery fire, which was conducted for more than an hour throughout the division, the enemy attacked us again on September 3, 1944, around two in the morning. The 73rd motorized regiment was located in Borki, which was three times inferior to the advancing Russians. Despite being outnumbered, it was not until noon that the Soviets managed to penetrate the eastern part of the city of Borki. However, at about 20:00, the test battalion Riterai

About the subsequent battle, which continued on September 4, 1944, it was said: "Southeast of the mouth of the Bug and Narewa, the Russians entrenched. At 6 o'clock in the morning, Operation Viking was launched, during which the enemy was to be destroyed. It was attended

Rieter's battalion and part of the SS Panzer Division. The Red Army was driven out of this bridgehead. On September 11, 1944, the war diary read: "In the combat area in the morning, the Russians broke through the front line. Rieter's battalion launched a counterattack and drove the enemy back."

On September 24, 1944, the rather battered 560th battalion was sent to the reserve of the 9th Army. However, on September 29, he was again thrown into battle. At this time, the last centers of the uprising were liquidated in Warsaw. Reinhard Schulze, who was wounded, and therefore his combat use as a "test soldier" lasted only 4 hours, recalled: "In the last area of Warsaw, the Poles dug in so hard and fought so desperately that the Germans simply could not free him. Then someone from the command of the Wehrmacht said: so, we are withdrawing ordinary units and launching a test battalion there. After artillery preparation with the support of tanks, the 560th battalion began an assault on the Warsaw district of Żoliborz. On September 30, 1944, the remnants of the fighting surrendered. For the completion of the operation to eliminate the Warsaw Uprising, the commander of the 560th battalion, Major Rieter, was awarded the Knight's Cross on October 20, 1944.

For the period from the spring of 1943 to September 1944, there was not a single mention in the documents about the "unreliability" of the "test soldiers". There were, of course, attempts to desert from the front. Some of the deserters were shot, others were given 10 years in prison. However, desertion at that moment began to gain momentum. The notes of that time contain the following words: "From the statements one gets the impression that most of the fugitives and deserters are soldiers of the 560th and 500th battalions." It still remains a mystery how many "test subjects" voluntarily surrendered to the Red Army. The fact that there were such cases could be learned from the leaflets of the National Committee "Free Germany", which were scattered in October 1943 over the German positions in Melitopol. The leaflet said: "When the Russians advance, do not shoot or run away. As soon as you notice them, raise your hands high and surrender. So did the soldiers of the 560th battalion Kurt Penten, Heinrich Penz, Gerhard Schmit and many others. Apparently, the voluntary surrender was not so massive as to jeopardize the internal order in the "test battalion". But the fact that such processes were going on was noted in the units adjacent to the 560th battalion. In particular, a message was preserved dated April 22, 1944, which came out of the depths of the 1st motorized battalion of the 5th Luftwaffe field division: "South of the battalion, the assigned part of the motorized company after some time refused to go into battle. All attempts have failed. The soldiers dropped their weapons and left their positions in complete disarray. When the head physician of the combined arms unit wanted to send them forward again, they explained that they would never take up arms. When he gave out the carbines that belonged to the wounded and asked them to go on the attack, they again threw away their weapons and headed towards Krymskaya. When on April 4, 1943, a platoon of 22 men was ordered to join the battle, only 15 men advanced to the front line, as seven remained in their positions. Obviously, these people could not be moved from their place, only with the use of force. The retreat in complete disarray is a clear sign that the motorized company has no will at all to continue the fight. The only task for these people is to save their own lives."

When the 560th battalion fought fierce battles in August 1944, the following documents arrived at the division headquarters: "Due to the numerous cases of desertion from the 786th Turkish battalion, I demand to urgently remove it from the front." In the combat log of the 9th Army, one could also read about the 73rd German Infantry Division, in which there was no "stability":

"September 12, 1944. The still numerically strong infantry regiment of the 73rd Division refuses to engage in combat. The first onslaught threw the regiment from its positions.

The fleeing soldiers were gathered in Prague only with the help of the gendarmerie. Courts-martial pass one verdict after another.

September 19, 1944. This day will be decisive in the fate of the 73rd Infantry Division. The Fuhrer refused to dissolve it. Soldiers guilty of cowardice and flight must, according to the laws of war, be shot. A special court will conduct the investigation under Major General Zickenius, commander of the 391st Security Division. The entire division is in a cordon, which will remain until the moment it is sent to pass the "test". However, we do not observe anything similar in the 560th battalion.

If we talk about the 500th battalion, then until the end of May 1943 it was part of the 101st Jaeger Division. Then the battalion, in the "fire brigade" mode, was transferred to various units, for example, the 13th Panzer Division, the 79th Infantry Division, the 98th Infantry Division, the 304th Infantry Division, the 306th Infantry Division, the 335th Infantry division. At the same time, at the end of May 1944, he was again returned to the 101st Jaeger Division. Documents on the combat operations of the battalion were preserved only for the summer of 1943. In June 1943, the commander of the 500th battalion reported to the High Command of the Ground Forces: "The remnants of the battalion - the combat strength of 30 soldiers - after fierce defensive battles in early June on the Kuban bridgehead west of Krymskaya continue to hold this sector of the front. Despite massive losses, the test soldiers continue to show excellent morale. One gets the impression that during the defensive battles, the remnants of the battalion were imbued with the idea of their special mission and believe in passing the test. After the fighting during the winter retreat had already given many chances for a test, the best way to atone for faults was to try to break through the Russian positions on the Kuban bridgehead.

After the battalion was replenished in July with fresh forces, which, according to the documents, were "obedient and ready for use", the following was reported about the battles of the period August-September 1943: "After huge losses during the fighting on September 13, 1943, the battalion was sent to the reserve. On September 13, the command was given: on the same day to take him out by air. The battalion convoy was to be transported by rail. On September 28, 1943, the Russians attacked the battalion several times. However, all attacks were repulsed. On September 30, the Russians, with the help of three army corps, supported by 240 tanks, launched a powerful offensive. However, the Russians failed to break through the sector of the front held by the battalion. After bloody battles, the Russians broke through the front near the neighboring part. As a result, the enemy tried to attack the battalion from the rear with an infantry regiment and 30 tanks. Despite the fact that the battalion was attacked by superior enemy forces from three sides, the soldiers did not leave their positions. Only when the onslaught became too strong was the battalion forced to retreat. In this heroic struggle, the soldiers of the battalion in the bulk proved to be brave warriors.

Thus, these documents indicate that the 500th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion could be considered the most reliable military formation, which gradually gave it the character of some kind of "elitist unit". An interesting "Report on the activities of the battalion", which is dated October 9 of the year. It points out the obvious signs of an alleged change in the internal climate in the 500th battalion. "The test teams get the impression that they are being used as cannon fodder. This is also confirmed by a Russian leaflet that was airdropped on the 500th battalion when it was fighting the hardest fighting in the Kuban training ground in August. In the leaflet, the 500th battalion was designated as a "suicide formation" in which a person means nothing.

In fact, it seems that in September 1943 serious problems with the so-called "self-control" begin in the 500th battalion. On December 7, 1943, an attempt was made to desert. The escapee was captured by the gendarmerie. On January 23, 1944, an order appears for the arrest of a certain Friedrich W., who is accused of "undermining the combat capability and

unauthorized abandonment of a part. In just a year (from December 1943 to December 1944), the soldiers of the 500th battalion received seven death sentences. In four cases, deserters were sentenced to 12 years in prison. On September 29, 1943, the first case occurred



surrender to the Red Army. This attempt was made by the "test soldiers" Richard B. and Engelbert G., Richard B. was sentenced to 6 months in prison for theft, which was replaced by service in the 500th battalion. The company commander drew attention to him, giving the following description: "Richard B. has a secretive character, is very reserved, keeps to himself. He is notorious among his colleagues. Spiritually, he is a very difficult person. Physically weak and slow. His behavior during the heavy battles for Leninskoye (September 8-12, 1943, Kuban bridgehead) is assessed as excellent.

But apparently, Engelbert G., who was familiar with Soviet propaganda, was the initiator of the transition to the side of the Red Army. Already during the August battles, he tried to convince some of his colleagues to voluntarily surrender. At the same time, Engelbert G. demonstrated, as a resident of Upper Silesia, a good knowledge of the Polish language. His political motivation could be dictated by a special Polish self-consciousness. In the past, Engelbert G. was convicted of "arbitrarily leaving the unit" and sentenced to two years in prison.

There is no doubt that the described incidents do not exhaust all cases of "undermining combat capability", "cowardice", "desertion", "going over to the side of the enemy". But these are only those cases that were registered in the documents. Nevertheless, in the 500th battalion there were no signs that the unit could completely break out of obedience. In any case, she continued to be considered reliable and ready for use at the front.

If such incidents happened, they concerned other units of the 6th Army, which at that time included the 500th Battalion. Perhaps, this applies to a greater extent to the 999th XU Infantry Battalion, which, as follows from the number, was one of the "999th test units." On December 31, 1944, this formation replaced the 500th battalion at the Dnieper bridgehead in the Berislav region, which was located northwest of Kherson. In January 1944, many soldiers from the 999th battalion went over to the Soviet side - mainly German communists. For this reason, already on February 8, 1942, the counterintelligence officer of the 6th Army was forced to consult with the counterintelligence of Army Group A. It was decided that the 99th battalion was not intended for use at the front. The battalion was withdrawn from the front line due to its absolute unreliability. In order to gain control of the battalion and stop subversive propaganda, a special agent of the secret field police was introduced into the 999th battalion. After the agent began to make reports, under dramatic circumstances, all the "political" members of this 999th battalion were arrested and disarmed. The same process was repeated somewhat later in the 999th battalions of HIM and H/P. As a result, in March 1944, about 450 people, former "political" soldiers of the 999th battalions, were sent to Germany to conduct a more detailed investigation. Already after several weeks of use on the Eastern Front, the military command received clear evidence of the complete opposite of the 500th and 999th battalions. An attempt to replace one with another ended in failure. It is interesting and revealing what memories remained after a short meeting between the 500th battalions and the 999th, which took place in the spring of 1944. Erwin Bartz published his memoirs in the GDR in 1956, which stated: "We are replacing the 500th formation. The 500s are soldiers who allowed themselves to commit a violation of military discipline, for which they were punished. Among them are many former sergeant majors and non-commissioned officers, and even demoted officers. The "test" with which the soldiers of regular units are frightened is merciless.

The convoy of this military formation resembles a trading caravan. On the machines to which the cattle are tied, tables, beds, paintings are piled up. Each department creates its own warehouse of provisions and goods. Chefs are the best. The 500s are angry that their quiet trench life is coming to an end.

"You are unspeakably lucky," one of them throws, "you can be calm, Ivans don't care about you. In general, life here is good. Sometimes, of course, due to shortages, they will shake a pistol in front of their noses. The main thing from time to time is to hide what you stole.

Undoubtedly, in the assessment given to the 999th by Johann Fricke, an employee of the authorized personnel of the 500th battalion, numerous prejudices were read: "We were relieved by the 999th, and we immediately left the positions. We were already on the march for a new mission when the order came to turn. The 999s were knocked out of position. We had a negative attitude towards the 999s, if only because they lost the positions that we held. They were not our friends. The attitude towards them was bad, since they were precisely the criminals. The 999s weren't a good formation."

Such a mutual perception of the 999th and the soldiers of the 500th battalions sheds light on the specific relationship between the two types of "test formations". If we take into account the expansion of anti-fascist resistance, then the negative attitude towards the 999s can be explained. While the history of the 999th battalions was inextricably linked with the anti-fascist activities of the "political", such actions in the 500th battalions were isolated. This was dictated by the fact that this formation was steadily trying to give a certain "elitist character". According to Johann Fricke, the 500th battalion acquired a similar character sometime in the summer of 1944. Regarding this time, he said: "We were the" fire brigade ". If the Ivans broke through the front somewhere, then we were immediately sent there. We can say without too much pride that we managed to cope with the task. When the Ivans found out that we were being transferred to their sector of the front, they stopped attacking. While we existed, everyone could sleep peacefully, since all the burdens were behind us. It may sound a bit pompous, but that's how it was. At least that was the case in the early years. We failed to drive Ivanov out of Russia. But we have always been forced to move forward where others retreated. God forbid, I don't mean to say that the others were good for nothing. But we have always held our positions."

Despite the pathos of the former warrior and inflated conceit, in principle, he very accurately described the situation around the 500th battalion. He was especially proud of the fact that the "chronist" of the 100th Jaeger Division noted the successful counterattack of the 500th battalion, undertaken in October 1944. At that moment, the battalion was in the Carpathians, where the Red Army, suffering huge losses, undertook an operation to unblock the Slovak National Uprising. One could read about the then battles in the mountains: "October 3 on the left flank! divisions, the 500th battalion went on the offensive. After a long and deceptive lull between battles, the battalion, without artillery preparation, suddenly attacked the enemy positions in Okraglik. At 11 o'clock this height was captured. The Russians immediately launched a counterattack from the west. They pushed back! 21 to Zemplenoroczi. The 550th battalion gathered all the reserves and again attacked the Russians from the southeast. At 15 o'clock Okraglik was recaptured."

If we turn to the history of the 550th battalion, we will see that from March 1943 to June 1944, that is, until the collapse of Army Group Center, it fought along the retreat from Velizh to Vitebsk. In this case (as in all other cases), the battalion was thrown into the most difficult sectors of the front. A former soldier of the battalion spoke about the situation in March 1943: "The test battalion occupied the worst and most hopeless positions, having the task of keeping the path from Dune and Velizh. The Russians occupied the opposite bank of the Dune and had a numerical advantage in all positions. The only way to bring supplies and food was Dune, which was located

under constant Russian shelling. This was the reason for the poor supply and the apparent lack of food. I have never eaten so badly in any of the war days.

At the end of April 1943, the 550th battalion was transferred to a new location. In the combat log of the 83rd Infantry Division it was written: "April 11, 1943. Before the transfer of the 550th battalion to a new place, I apply for a three-day rest. The commander explains that this period is enough to prepare for the conduct of hostilities on a very difficult sector of the front near Krivka.

In the general front line near Krivka, a ledge was formed, which was attacked from several sides at once. At that moment it was the hottest site in the Velizh region. On May 31, 1943, the 550th battalion experienced a powerful Soviet offensive here. In the documents of the 3rd tank

The army said about him: "At 19 hours 30 minutes, after strong artillery preparation, an offensive was launched in the Krivka area by forces of 300-400 soldiers and 4 tanks. At 22:30, a counterattack was launched. Enemy losses - 96 killed and 5 captured. Own losses - 5 killed, 28 wounded. The 550th test battalion should be especially singled out, it fought very bravely.

On June 1, 1943, the command of the 330th Infantry Division gives the battalion the following assessment: "The battalion is completely suitable for defense and fights very well in local offensive operations. For larger offensives, skills are lacking. In the course of several shock operations, the battalion proved a good state of mind. Such shock operations continued for several more months. When at the end of August 1943 a transport with replenishment arrived in the battalion, "the state of the battalion was maintained at its best." The battalion was then transferred from the 330th Infantry Division to the 87th Infantry Division, where it also received favorable reviews. "The so-called 550th test battalion, which distinguished itself in the defense of the" Krivsky ledge, may in the future be suitable within the framework of the 87th division."

During the "leveling of the front", undertaken in September 1943, the battalion at first tried to attack, but in November 1943 went into a dead-end defense 20 kilometers east of Vitebsk. In November 1943 and February 1944, the German units barely managed to repel two offensives of the Red Army aimed at liberating the city.

The main blow fell on the 206th Infantry Division, to which the 550th Battalion was transferred. In German historiography, it is believed that the winter battles in the Vitebsk region were "an undeniable triumph in the history of the 206th Infantry Division." "The fact that during these battles the division was mentioned twice in the reports of the Wehrmacht clearly shows that it stood out among other military formations. In the winter of 1943-1944, Vitebsk was an outpost of the German units on the Eastern Front, against which the largest enemy offensives crashed. At the same time, signs of a military catastrophe were becoming more and more distinct in other sectors of the Eastern Front. During these battles, the 550th battalion was almost completely destroyed, but almost no mention of this has survived. Already in the vicinity of Krivka, since September 1944, he suffered tremendous losses. When on September 24, 1944, the commander of the 3rd Panzer Army pointed out to Field Marshal Bush that there were high losses and a clear lack of reserves, he cited the 550th battalion as an example, in which hardly more than half of the combat strength remained. Although in November - December 1943 transports with replenishment were delivered to the battalion more than once, during the winter battle for Vitebsk it was so battered that in February 1944 its first company consisted of only 11

soldier.

At the end of April 1944, the remnants of the battalion were withdrawn from the front line for several days. Then the next replenishment arrived. According to one of the officers of the court-martial, "the 550th test battalion was a remarkable operational formation." He saw the reason for this in the proper selection of "human material", which concerned both authorized personnel and "test soldiers." In particular, after the war, he

stated: "I was in charge of the 550th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion for a year. I witnessed how at that time it was successfully used on the most dangerous sector of the front, limited by Vitebsk Velizh-Demidov.

Already at the beginning of May 1944, the 550th battalion was waiting for a new task. He was thrown into a critical section of the front, southeast of Vitebsk. In his memoirs "My Path with the 45th Infantry Division", Rudolf Gshöpf wrote: "The most vulnerable spot on the Eastern Front was the ledge formed by the positions of Army Group Center, which just begged to be pincered and surrounded." In those days, the 550th Battalion was first part of the 14th and then the 299th Infantry Division.

When the general offensive of the Red Army began on June 22, 1944, during which the Center group was defeated, the 550th battalion was one of the first to take the fight. There are almost no survivors left. The few survivors were among the 57 thousand German

prisoners of war who were led through the streets of Moscow on October 17, 1944. One of these "lucky ones" was Joachim T., who got into the battalion in April 1944. From his memoirs it follows that in May-June 1944, the 550th battalion observed all the same "masculinity" as before: "We were thrown where it smelled of fried. Now we can safely say that from the very beginning it was assumed at the top that we would have huge losses. They probably thought: since these are convicts, then we'd better sacrifice them. But at the same time, they also knew that we had our own code of honor, and that we, unlike others, were glad to be tested.

The latter, unlike Heinz Verleich, did not belong to the Red Chapel. Verleich, a Berlin communist, apparently arrived at the front near Vitebsk in the same echelon as Joachim T. He did not intend to show miracles of heroism and die for Nazi Germany, and therefore Heinz Verleich voluntarily surrendered to the Soviets in the first battle troops. Verleich's fate was not easy - in January 1944 he ended up in the Wehrmacht prison in Torgau, from where he was transferred to the Dieburg prison, and from there, after rechecking, he ended up in the "test battalion". On the eve of being sent to the front, he met with his wife, telling her that in any case he would move to the Soviet side. It was a risky step, but Verleich made such a confession so that his wife would not worry if she received a funeral or a message that he was missing.

In fact, Heinz Verleich had long been in Soviet captivity when the official notice of his death came to his home. However, Verleich's belonging to the 550th battalion aroused certain suspicions, which was an obstacle to his involvement in anti-fascist work, and later his return to his homeland. The misunderstanding was cleared up when lists of KKE activists came from Germany, which were certified by SED officials.

After the complete destruction in the summer of 1944 of the 550th battalion in Skierniewitz, it was re-formed. At first, newcomers were sent to the western bank of the Vistula, to a place located 40 kilometers south of Warsaw. It was there that one of the bridgeheads of the Red Army was located. On August 1, 1944, the new 550th battalion was attached to reinforce the 1132nd Grenadier Brigade. It was then that the first combat order was received.

"Order of the command of the 1132nd Grenadier Brigade.

The enemy will try to expand the captured bridgehead at the mouth of the river. Pilica, striking in a south and southwest direction. On the night of August 1-2, the construction of the bridge began.

For the reinforced 1132nd Grenadier Brigade, first of all, block the bridgehead along the Magnuszew-Minsk-Mazowiecki line, and destroy the enemy after the arrival of reinforcements. The offensive began on August 2, 1944.

The attack should be carried out by the forces of the 2nd battalion of the 1132nd Grenadier Brigade, the 1st battery, the 550th shock battalion, the 2nd battalion of the 73rd motorized regiment.

We have not received information about how the 550th battalion showed itself in the battles near Warsaw. In any case, it is known that the Soviet bridgehead was never taken. Alexander Shel, a former employee of the reinforced 73rd motorized regiment mentioned above, later recalled the 550th battalion: "The 550th battalion at first had a good reputation. That is why he was placed between the battalions of the 1132nd Grenadier Brigade, which was not an organic formation ... At that time, officers were barely found for the 550th battalion. Therefore, the command of the battalion was in a hopeless state. Its combat strength was tiny. The company was commanded by some sergeant major. He was chosen for this position by his colleagues. However, he knew how to put things in order.

The main forces of the 19th Panzer Division were pulled up for two days - August 4-5, 1944. It was at this time that the enemy attacked the battalion. The Red Army broke through its defenses, as the battalion clearly did not have the strength to withstand the onslaught ... After the arrival of the 19th Panzer Division, the battalion began to obey Colonel Schlipper. His positions were constantly under attack. Temporary absence

command further worsened the situation. Only the confident command of Captain Schuwirth and the stamina of the 73rd Motorized Regiment made it possible to hold out for these two days.

At the end of August 1944, the 550th battalion, together with part of the 19th tank division, was redeployed north of Warsaw, where the Red Army managed to first force the Bug, and then the Narew. The battalion comes under the command of the 5th SS Panzer Division "Viking", which is trying to stop the Soviet advance. There, the battalion again distinguished itself during two offensive operations. Sources indicate that the 550th battalion was in no way inferior to the other "500th test units" until the end of the summer of 1944. In this regard, of particular interest is the assessment of the court-martial officer, whose opinion has already been cited above. "According to the results of my annual supervision of the 550th battalion, I can say that it received no more convicted criminals than other front-line units." This statement can be verified, since the "penalty lists" of the 206th Infantry Division, which cover the period from November 1943 to April 1944, have been preserved. During this period, the 550th battalion was just listed as part of this division. During this period, 339 trials were witnessed, including those that ended in an acquittal. In 67 out of 339 cases (which is approximately 20%), they were employees of the 550th battalion. If we look at the combat strength of the battalion, we will see that it was hardly more than 10% of its personnel. Nevertheless, these figures show that in the battalion, penalties were issued more often than in other army units. At the same time, it should be emphasized that along with fairly "harmless" crimes (theft, disobedience, the forbidden wearing of other people's awards), the most part was occupied by serious Viyn misconduct. 33 cases (i.e. half) concerned desertion. On this occasion, two meetings of the court-martial were held, as a result of which five of the guilty were executed, and four were sentenced to long prison terms /. The remaining 25 cases were transferred to other courts. Moreover, in 18 cases it was the military field court of the 225th field commandant's office (Skierniewice). 12 cases related to the "arbitrary abandonment" of the unit - in these cases, the sentence was quite lenient. Only in one case was the defendant sentenced to eight years in prison - but here it was about the manifestation of "cowardice." The most high-profile trial was the trial of three soldiers who were accused of "inciting a riot." Two of them were executed.

These figures show that since the end of 1943, in the 550th battalion, as in all 500th battalions, there was an increase in discipline violations, which the military leadership considered as a "loss of self-control." You can find a variety of reasons for this. Firstly, war fatigue common to the entire Wehrmacht. Secondly, these are high losses in the battalions, which probably played the most important role in loosening discipline. From the end of 1943, the passage of the "test" for most of the soldiers from the battalions became a farce. The chances of survival were so minimal that no one thought about rehabilitation. And therefore, no one thought about returning to the previous parts, which had negative consequences. And, finally, we must proceed from the fact that Soviet propaganda played its role. In the early years of the war, it was very primitive. But as the military successes of the Red Army, German anti-fascists from among the prisoners began to be involved in propaganda actions. Their work significantly increased the effectiveness of anti-Hitler agitation. Among the deserters, more and more often, soldiers began to come across who intended to go over to the side of the Red Army or voluntarily surrender. If we talk about the 550th battalion, then the following information has been preserved. On November 23, 1943, Walter F. went over to the side of the Red Army. On January 26, 1944, Wilhelm M. did this. On February 17, 1944, Stefan E. and Rudolf P. voluntarily surrendered. On April 8, 1944, Rudolf 3 followed their example. Biographies of these "defectors." Most of them were collected during the investigation of the Gestapo, which decided what measures to take against the families of "traitors".

In the case of Walter F., the Gestapo managed to collect the following dossier: "Walter F, a coffee planter, who went over to the side of the Soviet Union, was born on February 20, 1914 in Brussels in the family of a graduated engineer. From a political point of view, he did not discredit himself in any way. From the end of 1932 to the beginning of 1933 he was temporarily in the SA. The facts that allow us to talk about the present or past negative attitude towards National Socialism are not known. On the contrary, F. in the past can be characterized as an adventurer.

After 8 years of attending a secondary school and 2 years of studying in a rural school, he did not receive any professional education. In 1933, without the permission of his mother, he went to travel to Rome, and then, at his own peril and risk, emigrated to East Africa, where, while in the German community, he allegedly worked as a coffee planter for two years. Traveled all around, tried to be a hunter. Begged for some time. From Tanganyika he returned back to the German Reich.

From the following message from the authorized chief of the security police and SD for Belgium and France, it follows that F. already on December 29, 1940, deserted from his unit (field mail index 38 061 0) to the part of France that was not occupied by German troops. Later, he put forward an incredible version that he was sent there on official business. Mother F. enjoys a good reputation in the district committee of the NSDAP. Were you unable to establish any past or current negative attitudes towards the party that could have influenced her son's defection or his subsequent transfer?

Born in Czechoslovakia and raised there "Volksdeutsche" Stefan E. was a "difficult nut to crack" for the Gestapo. His motivation could not be established. In 1941 he was sentenced to 5 years in prison for "crossbow". At the same time, the court came to the conclusion that the actions of Stefan E. were not dictated by anti-state attitudes. He wanted to portray his injury as an act of participants in the French Resistance, in order, on the one hand, to earn recognition, on the other hand, to get a vacation and settle some family matters upon returning to his homeland. From the verdict announced on October 3, 1941, we learn the biography of the certified businessman Stefan E. "In Czechoslovakia, he could not find any work for himself, since he was a German. In 1927 he received his first conviction. In Bratislava, he owed the owner of the apartment 220 crowns, for which he was sentenced to 11 days of arrest. In February 1927 he was drafted into the Czechoslovak army, where he served for 18 months. After demobilization in 1928, he was able to get a job as an accountant, but was fired from his job because

he was convicted of embezzlement of 200 crowns. For this offense he was sentenced to 4 months in prison. After serving this sentence, he failed to find a suitable occupation. Therefore, he traveled with itinerant theater troupes, in which he played the role of a decorator, an auxiliary worker and a poster-poster. In 1931, he temporarily got a job as a second accountant at Siemens and Schukert (Bratislava). From there, he was fired allegedly due to illness. After that, he rejoined the acting troupe, which wandered from village to village, which allowed its members to earn meager means. Since the acting business did not bring much profit in the summer, he was often hired as a farm laborer by the peasants. Since the plays in which he took part were against the law, in 1931 he again ended up in prison ... In 1932 he was sentenced to a fine of 5 shillings<sup>221</sup> for carrying unauthorized weapons, which, according to him, were only theatrical props. On September 12, 1934, he was sentenced to 3 months in prison, as he tried to forge a passport in the name of Otto Bergner ... In the spring of 1938, the defendant was in

Wels (Austria), where he tried to find a suitable job at the labor exchange. But this was unlikely, since he was a Czechoslovak citizen who did not have any references. For this reason, he forged a letter of recommendation in which he identified himself as a member of the NSDAP and a veteran of the SA. In addition, he indicated that he had been convicted of political activity and allegedly lost his job at Siemens because of this. The letter further stated that the defendant had been recommended by the Imperial Minister, Dr. Frank. On the basis of this letter, on April 1, 1938, the defendant was able to get a job at the commandant's office of the air base in Wels as a payroll accountant. During the next check of documents, a forgery was discovered and on April 14, 1938, the defendant was again detained. A few weeks later he was released from prison as he was subject to an amnesty." Such a reference should be enough to form the image of this Stefan E, who in 1938 joined the Sudeten German Party (a pro-Hitler organization in Czechoslovakia), and after the outbreak of the war volunteered for the Wehrmacht.

On February 14, 1944, Stefan E. for the first time addressed from the Soviet side through loudspeakers to his former colleagues from the 550th battalion. Shooter Wilhelm A.

recalled this: "At first, music poured out of the propaganda dynamics of the Russians. When it ended, I heard: "Attention! Specially for the first company of the 550th battalion. This is what shooter Stefan E says. More than 300 people died in our battalion. What else is needed for our struggle? Go to the Russians. Great food here! We will be sent to work at industrial enterprises, will be provided with a hearty ration and will be given the opportunity to sleep at night. We'll even be allowed to date women. The first company consists of 11 people, 9 of which are looking for food. How can one attack under these conditions? And one more thing, I would love to see non-commissioned officer Spiegel again! I'm not sure I reproduced his speech verbatim. But I conveyed the content very close to the text. The 11 people from the 1st company mentioned by Stefan E. were absolutely true ... Unter officer Spiegel was wounded and could hardly go to his squad from the dugout. He was a stern Bavarian warrior who liked to slash the truth into the eyes.

Rudolf Z., who defected to the Red Army on April 8, 1944, was only known for the fact that in the spring of 1944 he was sentenced to prison for self-mutilation. In prison, he took the opportunity and went to the 550th battalion. After staying in the battalion for only two weeks, he escaped. The company commander explained the act of Rudolf 3 in this way: "In fact, he turned out to be unreliable and cowardly. They could not even characterize him in the company in which he spent only

that's nothing."

But if since the autumn of 1943 there has been an increase in cases of desertion, "betrayal", "moral decay", then these processes still did not reach the level that

jeopardize the internal organization of the battalion. This can be proved by the example of the fact that the relevant acts do not contain negative assessments of the 500th battalions. "Negative" manifestations were inherent in all front-line units. Several examples can be given. On June 21, 1943, the headquarters of the 3rd Panzer Army began to notice "signs of decay" in the Cossack units. And on July 22, 1943, in the documents of the same unit, we find the entry: "One-third of the field training division consists of Alsations, residents of Lorraine and Luxembourg. There are disturbing notes in their perustrated letters. In numerous cases, they proceed not from a Germanophile position, but from the need for a close connection with France. They rejoice at the losses that Germany bears in this war. They rejoice at every defeat. During the landings in Sicily, they mostly emphasize that the war will finally end soon. Similar fears were voiced in August 1943: "The Alsations, the inhabitants of Lorraine and Luxembourg are largely politically unreliable. Therefore, sending these units to the front is an attempt to establish tight control over them. As subsequent documents showed, this "attempt" ended in complete failure. On May 27, 1944, desertion among the "Western" volunteers reached astonishing proportions. The documents of the 9th Army, to which the 550th Battalion was assigned in September-October 1944, contain an assessment of various foreign units of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS. "The 1st and 2nd East Muslim SS regiments, Azerbaijani units and the 3rd Cossack regiment, equally, as well as the 501st SS Jaeger battalion, have been weakened so much due to the changed situation at the front that there is no guarantee that they will whether they follow the given orders.

Looking for something similar in the 550th battalion is a waste of time. The only "unpleasant" incident occurred only in March 1943. Let us describe it in the utmost detail, since this isolated case provides interesting material for reflection. In particular, it allows answering the question: to what extent were the 500th battalions involved in the anti-fascist activities.

On March 27, 1943, an entry appeared in the combat log of the 83rd Infantry Division: "In the 550th battalion, a former convicted of robbery shot his squad leader and three soldiers, and seriously wounded several people. Since the killer fled the scene of the crime, all field commandant's offices were notified of the verification of suspicious individuals. Then the criminal, who was a certain Fritz K., managed to escape. He was caught after the war. In 1951, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison for killing four people. In the documents of the Wehrmacht, only a dry mention of the past robbery remained. This is too dull a characterization for the life of the former woodworker Fritz K. He himself described

the circumstances of the robbery that he committed in occupied France, as a Wehrmacht soldier: "In January 1942, during a leave, I and several of my colleagues wandered around the hotels. We were pretty drunk when we found out that we had run out of money. We were staying in one of the hotels in Lille. Since, besides us, there were no other guests in the hotel, we decided to steal money from the cash register. While my friend kept the owner of the hotel at gunpoint, I took money out of the cash register. There were about 35 stamps in total." When the court sentenced Fritz K. not to 5 years in prison (as was supposed to be for robbery), but only to 2 years, it became clear that the 21-year-old young man, even according to the harsh Nazi judges, did not fall into the category of hardened criminals. After Fritz served 8 months in prison, he was sent to the battalions. In January 1943, he was supposed to undergo a "test" in the 550th battalion. Upon distribution, he was assigned to the 3rd company. According to one of the soldiers, the 3rd company had the most disgusting commander, so getting into it was in itself a punishment. Fritz K. was more difficult than others to get used to a new life. He was dissatisfied with poor nutrition, ill-treatment, considered himself unfairly convicted, and therefore he did all the commands reluctantly, if at all.

performed. Fritz K. reluctantly communicated not only with the "authorized personnel", but also with colleagues from among the "subjects". He kept walking around with a sad expression on his face. It is not surprising that he soon became known in the battalion as a "black sheep", a person who did not want to do what others were doing. He was considered an unreliable soldier. On February 26, 1943, his first squad leader entered in his notebook: "Does not follow orders, constantly wears a warm coat, closed, difficult to lead." Fritz's actions seemed senseless to his colleagues, since they could not understand how it was possible to freeze so much. In order to avoid conflicts, Fritz K. was transferred to a neighboring department. But there were no problems for him. The new company commander refused to put up with the antics of the "eccentric". While others took their service for granted, Fritz considered it monstrous. Perhaps military service generally disgusted him, as a person with a strongly pronounced sense of dignity. In any case, he found life in the company unbearable. On March 26, 1943, the new squad leader attacked him with threats. As eyewitnesses said, "son of a bitch" was the mildest of the curses brought down on Fritz K. The bottom line was that the non-commissioned officer threatened to send Fritz back to where he came from. The reason for the abuse was the refusal of Fritz to go to the chopping of firewood. He explained this by saying that it was not his turn. In 1951, he stated that he was very frightened by the non-commissioned officer's threats: "Threats plunged me into depression. You can say that I was on the verge of despair. I was depressed by the fact that I would have to go back to prison or spend even more time in the battalion."

A tragedy occurred at night, the details of which were not fully clarified even after the war. When Fritz K. returned from the guard to the dugout, then, according to him, the following happened: "I watched the commander of my squad and two or three other people lie on the beds. I was seized with despair. When I saw the squad leader, I remembered what he had told me. I felt worse than ever. I raised my rifle, took aim and shot him in the head. I myself do not know how it happened. The non-commissioned officer remained lying on the bed after the shot. I saw that the bullet hit him in the temple. Only now it dawned on me what I had done. At that very moment, I saw my colleagues jump up from their beds. I started shooting at them. I did this because I was afraid they might catch me. I can't say exactly how many times I shot them. However, I can recall that the third one, which was lying on the upper tier, I shot when he tried to jump off. Suddenly, the dugout became quiet and calm. I have to say that at that moment I just lost my head. I flung open the door and rushed outside. At that moment I saw that two soldiers were about to enter the dugout. I jumped back against the wall. I managed to shoot first. One soldier immediately collapsed. Then I fired at another soldier. I did not know where to run - my thoughts were confused. Then I rushed to the bank of the Dune. The river was covered with ice, so I managed to get to the other side. There I noticed a large forest. I ran over it. How long, I don't remember. I ran as long as I could run. Then I fell into a dense bush, where I lay until dark. All day I thought about how to proceed. At first I thought about going home. However, later I realized that this was not possible. Since I had nowhere to hide, I decided to go over to the side of the Russians. When it got dark, I got out onto the road and got to the Russian part.



The fact that, after the execution of his colleagues, Fritz K. at first recklessly ran deep into the German rear, suggests that he did not have a well-developed escape plan. And so, his actions were not intentional. It would be more correct to talk about the commission of a crime in a state of passion. The documents of the 550th battalion contained only a short entry: "Obvious reason: disagreements with the squad leader." But was there an "obvious reason"? Fritz was prompted to take decisive action by fear for his life, which at that moment was threatened by a non-commissioned officer. The commander of the 3rd company, in which Fritz K. served, was obliged to inform the relatives of the victims about the tragedy. In the letters, he limited himself to the words: "The reasons for such a terrible act remained unknown."

The criminal was guided by his bloodthirstiness. The concept of "bloodthirstiness" rather expresses the helplessness of the company commander, who could not find words. However, it would be absurd to speak of "bloodthirstiness" as applied to Fritz K., rather, it is necessary to talk about an act of undisguised despair in an extreme situation, when a person relies only on instincts. Such conclusions are confirmed by the "farewell letter" that Fritz K. wrote in 1951 to a woman with whom he managed to marry a year before his arrest. The letter is imbued with an awareness of one's own guilt and a sense of humanity, which is probably inaccessible to a bloodthirsty killer: "My dear Friedel!

You often noticed that something oppresses me. These are the shadows of the past that came to life and brought charges against me. There is no hope, since this accusation is quite true. Now I have to pay for 5 minutes of my life when I lost control

over himself and let his emotions take over his mind. It's hard for me that you will suffer. But, alas, I cannot help you, although I would very much like to do so. I am grateful to you, Friedel, for the good that you have done for me. Please forgive me if I upset you, but I love you like my own mother. Today is our hour of parting. As a consolation, I can only tell you one thing, since I will suffer a well-deserved punishment, then God will not leave you, and He will reward you for love, for a good heart. He will give you peace and make you joyful and happy again. Dear Friedel, please don't be angry with me and don't be offended. You were the most precious thing I had in the world, but now I must set you free. If we are destined to meet in the future, then I will be a misguided old man. But you and our child must live happily so that I don't feel even more guilty."

The dramatic events of the morning of March 27, 1943 were just one of the human tragedies caused by the war. As you can see, the transition of Fritz K. to the Soviet side was in no way connected with his anti-fascist convictions. He was not in the Resistance. But everything changed when, for several months in Soviet captivity, he participated in the organization of the Free Germany National Committee. There he said that he was ready for an active struggle against fascism, as he "understood that the continuation of the war was madness."

And what happened during this period in the 561st battalion? In April 1943, the last of the five "test units", the 561st battalion, arrived on the Eastern Front. It was attached to Army Group North, directly subordinate to the command of the 18th Army. In the army itself, the battalion was introduced into the 28th Jaeger Division. This almost elite formation in the spring of 1943 was located in a swampy area north of the Mga, close to the bend of the Neva. The subordination of the 561st battalion to this particular division was due to the assumption that "after the end of the thaw, the Russians should have launched a major offensive." The general offensive of the Russians, planned for May 1943, which was supposed to remove the blockade from Leningrad, was an excellent occasion that gave a lot of "opportunities for passing the test."

However, the expectations of officers from the German General Staff did not materialize. Until the end of June 1943, the area where the 561st battalion was transferred was relatively calm. Then General of the High Command of the Ground Forces-at-Large Eugen Müller, accompanied by an adjutant and an imperial judicial adviser, arrived at the command post of the 28th Jaeger Division on June 8, 1943, in order to discuss operational issues of the "use of the formation" on the spot, and at the same time inquire about the use of the "test

battalion." The assembled officers were able to cite only one small operation as an example. On May 19, 1943, in the combat log of the 28th Jaeger Division, it was written: "The reconnaissance group of the 561st battalion, with a balance of forces of 1: 6, liquidated the enemy bunker, on its own initiative went deeper behind the front line, destroyed the enemy dugout and returned without loss, taking machine gun as trophies

and two machine guns. To this "military success" was added the fact that the shooter Adolf B., born in Ukraine, took advantage of the relative calm and on May 9, 1943, went over to the side of the Red Army. A few days later, the following appeals began to be heard from the Soviet positions from the propaganda speaker in broken German: "German soldiers! Your colleague Adolf B. has been with the Russians for more than two weeks. He works in his profession. Comrades! Come over to our side in groups. With us you will receive daily 600-900 g of bread and three hot meals a day. You will live in warm barracks. We even have a library. Every Sunday you can visit the bathhouse. German soldiers, stop this madness. Comrades, come to us!"

While the 28th Jaeger Division was assigned to the reserve, the 561st Battalion was transferred to the 215th Infantry Division, which occupied positions southwest of Leningrad near Krasnoye Selo. July 23, 1943, when the battalion began to show concern, he was thrown on the march. The day before, the alleged Soviet offensive began, which was aimed primarily at capturing the Sinyavino Heights (we mentioned them in previous chapters). To reinforce the 11th Infantry Division located in Sinyavino, not only the 5612th Battalion was sent, but also the 28th Jaeger Division. In this regard, the commander of the 18th Army sent the following warning to General Wehler of the 26th Army Corps: "Pay special attention to the 561st Battalion and the 28th Jaeger Division, since they have not yet been in battle." However, this warning was unnecessary, because the 561st battalion was able to show itself in bloody defensive battles. In late July and early August 1943, the 561st battalion was transferred to the left flank of the 11th Infantry Division. Immediately after arriving at the threatened sector of the front, the 561st Battalion took up a position on the so-called turning triangle, from which the soldiers of the 23rd Infantry Division of that look would have fled "like hares." The "test soldiers" who "fought like berserkers" managed to restore the old front line. About the course of this phase of the "third battle for Ladoga" in West German historiography, it was reported: "July 30 was the day the greatest battle began. At 08:10, artillery fire fell on the German positions in Sinyavino ... On August 4, after an hour of hurricane fire, the 2nd Grenadier Regiment and the 561st Infantry Battalion on the left flank managed to beat off all the waves of the attackers. In some cases, it was necessary to enter into close fire contact.

On August 13, 1943, General Veler reported by telephone to the commander of the 18th Army: "The 561st Special Purpose Infantry Battalion fought very well." And the day before this call, on August 12, 1943, the Red Army launched a decisive offensive in a completely different place. At that moment, the 11th Infantry Division was sent to a height of 43.3. After the two counterattacks undertaken by the division's forces were drowned in blood, the 561st battalion was concentrated at the height. With the support of an artillery battery and five flamethrowers from a sapper battalion, the already fairly battered battalion was supposed to recapture Hill 43.3 from the Red Army. The following evidence has been preserved about this episode: "At about midnight, the Soviet offensive was stopped. On that day, the 11th Infantry Division appeared for the second time in a year in the reports of the Wehrmacht. The division commander himself issued an order in part: I express special thanks to the 561st Infantry Battalion. The division is indebted to them, who, thanks to courageous actions in recent days, were able to eliminate the crisis situation.

As follows from the documents, after this operation, 110 people remained in the battalion, and on August 19, 1943, another counterattack awaited them. After it, the combat strength of the battalion was reduced to 45 people. After that, one officer from the headquarters of the 18th army reported to the 26th army corps: "The commander wants the 561st battalion to be withdrawn from the front line as soon as possible before it is completely destroyed." Once in the reserve, in August 1943, the 561st battalion was replenished with 450 people.

It was at this time that the first "pardon applications" and the first decisions on rehabilitation began to appear. At that time, the battalion got a fairly calm section of the front, which was limited to the banks of the Neva. In the meantime, the Soviet troops managed to capture Hill 43.3 and Hill 50.1, deepening into German positions. What this meant for the strategic position of the 18th Army was described by Bernhard Kranz: "The height rising steeply above the swamps from the north made it possible to view the entire territory up to Lake Ladoga. In the event of its loss, the issue of the Sinyavin Heights was resolved by itself. The complete loss of this territory had catastrophic consequences for the German defense. The entire reverse side of the front could be viewed from the dominant height of 50.1, which, however, did not make it possible to control the shore of Lake Ladoga. A defensive line was created to the west of Hill 50.1. However, there is a danger that during subsequent attacks it will be broken through, and the heights will be lost... The enemy attack on Hill 50.1 is constantly intensifying. The avalanche of bombs that fell on the front line makes it clear that it is only a matter of time before the defenses break through. In order not to give the enemy such an opportunity, a counterattack was launched from the flanks, which should eliminate the threat to the height of 50.1. It must straighten the front and open up new opportunities for defense."

For this counterattack, which was to take place on the night of September 23-24, 1943, the 561st Infantry Battalion was chosen. In a fierce struggle, the battalion still managed to unclench the pincers of the Red Army and throw it back from a height. This was the last "German victory at the Sinyavino Heights." In the meantime, the order for the 28th Jaeger Division emphasized: "Even in the dark, after the strongest fire preparation, the superior enemy forces from two sides began an attack on a height of 50.1. The attack was broken by artillery fire. The enemy units that broke into the height were destroyed or captured. The 49th and 83rd Chasseur Regiments, the 28th Reconnaissance Battalion, the 561st Special Purpose Infantry Battalion, and artillery units are equally involved in this successful defense. In a decisive counteroffensive, the 561st Infantry Battalion, units of the 49th Jaeger and 151st Grenadier Regiments managed to eliminate the dangerous flank of Hill 50.1. Despite the power of the attacks, the enemy offensive never reached its goal. The enemy, who, in a broadly planned offensive along the entire front south of Lake Ladoga, wanted to capture the decisive height of 50.1, was destroyed. My personal gratitude goes out to the 561st battalion that took part in the counteroffensive."

Battalion commander Metzger was never awarded the Knight's Cross. However, most of the combat personnel got ordinary birch crosses installed on their graves. The battalion commander himself noted this in his diary with a short phrase: "After this battle, the battalion lost many soldiers." As of October 1, 1943, there were 445 "vacant" places in the battalion. However, some of them were occupied by the wounded, who, having recovered, returned from field hospitals. Wilhelm Wicciok, who, as a non-commissioned officer, took part in the events of the summer of 1943, stated at that moment that "the soldiers of the test battalion are ready for the most diverse use." 50 years later, he expressed a slightly different point of view: "While we were counting our dead after the battle, others, terribly far from the war, were counting the profits. They wanted to take advantage at any cost, even at the cost of the lives of good people."

After the end of the third defensive battle south of Lake Ladoga, the 561st Infantry Battalion was again temporarily withdrawn from the front line. He was sent to Vayu, where reinforcements were to arrive in the first half of October 1943. Despite the fact that in all documents of the Wehrmacht the 561st battalion was characterized exceptionally well, on October 8, 1943, one of the "test soldiers" was executed in Vaye. At the top of the army, it was decided that this sentence, carried out in front of the entire battalion, should serve as "intimidation and uplifting of spirit in the test teams." Eduard R. was sentenced to death, who had already been tried for desertion and deliberate damage

government property. This time, he was re-charged with desertion and cowardice during the battle. In a legal opinion on the behavior of this soldier, it was reported that he did not show any interest in passing the "test" and, instead of accepting a "heroic death", preferred to hide from the battlefield: "On the evening of July 30, during the heavy defensive battles that

test battalion in the Sinyavino area, the defendant was supposed to be on the front line. Instead, with skillful persuasion, he sent his colleague ahead, and he himself, along with several friends, went to the rear to bring hot food and food rations. On the way back, he refused to receive a ration. Under this pretext, he went to the road, where he caught a truck going to Lesya. From Lesya, he went to Netshepert, where he met a corporal from a test construction company. He confessed to the corporal that he had left the unit without permission and was making his way home. The corporal joined the defendant.

An educational addition to the "terrible performance" that the execution was, were numerous Iron Crosses, which were awarded to authorized personnel and "reliable" soldiers. The first "applications for pardons" became an appendix to the awards. About 60 such statements from soldiers of the 561st battalion have been preserved in the documents of the 18th Army. Almost all of them are dated July, August or September 1943. But if you look at the number of dead, you will find that one "statement of pardon" accounted for nine to ten killed "trial soldiers."

In mid-October 1943, the 561st battalion was transferred to the Volkhov Front. There he again fell into the 28th Jaeger Division. He had to hold a site 15 kilometers north of Novgorod. Meanwhile, in November 1943, reinforcements were brought to the battalion. It was a rare case when the battalion was overcrowded - 1300 people began to be registered in it. On December 11, 1943, the battalion faced a major offensive operation. Horst Voit, who was then the commander of the 4th company, wrote that mortar fire was supposed to suppress Russian positions. "The 28th Jaeger Division was to destroy the Russian fortifications in the village of Teremets, after which the 561st battalion was to continue the offensive. The operation was supposed to be carried out by 120 soldiers and non-commissioned officers. Volunteers willing to participate in the operation turned out to be more than required. The tactical leadership of the operation, in which two strike groups took part, was entrusted to the headquarters of the 28th Jaeger Division. The first group was led by the commander of the 1st company, Lieutenant Kussmaul, the command of the second group was entrusted to an experienced non-commissioned officer from the Jaeger division ... The operation was successful. During it there were no big losses. It was even mentioned in the reports of the Wehrmacht. The new division commander, Major General Shpet, expressed his gratitude to the participants in the operation.

Information about the losses during this offensive has also been preserved: "The forces of the Soviet fortified point, which was covered with fire while eating, suffered enormous damage. The defense was broken during close fire contact and subsequent hand-to-hand combat. About 30 dugouts were destroyed. After a lightning attack, the shock groups restored the former front line. Since the number of volunteers who expressed a desire to participate in this operation was very large, this fact, no doubt, testifies to the high combat readiness inherent in most of the soldiers of the garrison. Meanwhile, such assessments look like a complete opposite against the background of reports of the Soviet offensive operation to liberate Novgorod, which began on January 14, 1944. The city was taken in pincers, and the offensive from the north fell on the 28th Jaeger Division. The beginning of the battle, which began with a hurricane fire opened by the Red Army, was reported in the combat log of the 18th Army: "January 14, 1944. Major V. reports the situation. On the coast of Lake Ilmen, about 1,000 people are moving north towards Novgorod. 1st sapper company with the support of assault

guns goes to the eastern flank of the enemy grouping. The 561st Battalion is fighting horribly."

However, Horst Voight "refutes" such assessments, calling them "shameless impudence" in his articles. The former company commander cites only the statements of his surviving soldiers as evidence - he himself was on vacation during this battle. Summarizing them, he comes to the conclusion: "In fact, the breakthrough of our defense occurred with the multiple superiority of the Russians. In addition, in that battle, the commander of the 2nd battalion of the 83rd Jaeger regiment, Captain Etzel, was killed. Our 1st and 2nd companies occupied a height of 18.7 when on the road from

Podberezya Ivan appeared. The battalion was called back on command. Although it was decided at the top that there was no such order."

Although within the framework of this book it does not matter at all whether Voight's information was true, or whether he was simply trying to protect the honor of his uniform. It is much more important to establish whether it was possible that at the beginning of 1944 one of the 500th battalions turned out to be incapable of combat. We will try to answer this question further in the course of our story.

The journal of operations of the 18th Army speaks to a certain extent about the truth of Horst Voight's statements. It speaks of an attack from the north from Zápolya. At 18:00, the 2nd Battalion of the 83rd Jaeger Regiment blocked the path of the advancing Soviet units. There is no doubt that the position of the 561st battalion was also hit, but nevertheless the assessment of "fighting disgustingly" seems beyond dispute. Wilhelm Wikciok, who fell into the Soviet environment, like Horst Voight, assessed the entry in the combat log as "rare insolence." He explains the partial retreat of the battalion by the multiple superiority of the advancing Soviet units: "The Russians moved in such an avalanche that it was simply pointless to shoot. It was possible to kill some of them, but this is the only thing that could be done in that situation. It was a human wall. In 1944, we could no longer withstand such power. We saw that the war was lost."

No less sober depiction of the events of that time is given in the documents of the investigative service of the German Red Cross. They spoke about the fate of the missing soldiers of the 561st battalion near Novgorod: "On January 14, 1944, Soviet units delivered powerful blows to German positions north of Lake Ilmen. Over the following days, they managed to break through the German defensive line in several places and link up with the Red Army units moving south. At this time, the 561st Infantry Battalion was sent to the Volkhov Front in the vicinity of Podberezye, 6 kilometers to the west of which the road from Novgorod to Chudovo was located. When on January 14-15 the enemy crossed the frozen Volkhov near the town of Vitka and directed a blow to the north-west, the battalion faced the threat of encirclement. After heavy fighting, this threat was averted. The fighting took place in the villages of Muravii and Germanovo located near Volkhov, as well as in the forested area between the villages of Ugoki and Vodskoye, and to the west of the causeway near the village of Bolshevodskoye, 4 kilometers south of Podberezye. On January 16, the enemy occupied these territories. Weakened by high losses, the battalion retreated along the road towards Vitka and Kolmevo, and then was partially transferred by rail from Novgorod towards Luga. When Novgorod fell on January 20, units of the 38th Army Corps were forced to retreat 60 kilometers to the west towards Luga. At the same time, the battalion covered the escape routes in the area of Berezovoye and Vashkovo, lying 15 kilometers west of Novgorod. At the same time, it was difficult for the battalion to get out of the encirclement. In early February, only its remnants reached Luga. During these battles, the 561st battalion lost a huge number of soldiers.

As you can see, some of the "test soldiers" were later reunited with units of the Wehrmacht. Many of the colleagues, seeing the superiority of the Red Army, chose to surrender without a fight. Thus, Wilhelm Wicciok reports on the soldier Erich S., who went over to the Soviet side when the offensive began. He simply dropped his weapon and raised his hands.

"No one could condemn him, since the battalion was almost completely destroyed." In one case, the message of a defector reached as far as Berlin. It was about Fritz H., who arrived in the battalion on January 27, 1944. At that time, the battalion consisted of 24 people. Having realistically assessed the situation, on January 30, Fritz H. voluntarily surrendered to the Red Army. Finally, Wilhelm Wicciok mentions that just before the Soviet offensive, "test soldiers" were no longer trusted. "At that time, one of our people disappeared from the secret. From that moment on, not a single one of the tested soldiers was sent to the guards. The missing soldier could be Hans G., a Berlin resident, who was listed as a "probable defector" in the battalion's casualty lists on December 24, 1943.

A few weeks earlier, one of the soldiers of the 1st company had shot himself in the foot in order to leave the front line. Oddly enough, the charge against him was not brought under the article "self-mutilation", but under the article "undermining combat capability." At the same time, soldier Valentin B. deserted from the battalion. He was caught and executed in the same way as the other two deserter soldiers.

These cases by themselves suggest the idea that since the end of 1943 the morale in the 561st battalion has been undermined. And these episodes were only signs of the "decomposition of the part." Nevertheless, in his books, Hans-Peter Kalush comes to the conclusion that the losses that the battalion suffered in January 1944 (killed, wounded, deserters, voluntarily surrendered, etc.) did not affect the mood in the battalion, more precisely, did not change them radically. That is why the 561st battalion, despite the multiple superiority of the Soviet troops, continued to courageously defend itself.

The scope of the winter offensive of 1944 led not only to the lifting of the blockade from Leningrad and the liberation of all territories adjacent to the city from the south, but also caused changes in the structure of Army Group North, which in turn led to the fact that the remnants of the 561st battalion were sent from the 18th to the 16th army.

In February 1944, the wreckage of the once numerous 500th battalion was removed from the front. They were transferred to the deep rear, to Latvia, where the next replenishment from Skierniewice was arriving. In order to fully restore the regular strength of the battalion, it took not only a month, but also a transfer to the 28th Jaeger Division, which was stationed in Nevel. And only in mid-April 1944, the patched up 561st battalion was sent to the Kriukhi area. Host Voight writes about the situation in the battalion at that time: "Since the enemy offensive continued north of Nevel, especially at the head of the Velikaya River, which threatened the connection between north and south, the command of the 28th division decided to redeploy the 561st battalion to the place of the most probable offensive near the city of Pustoshka ... as the weather improved, a fierce struggle began for certain heights, which was carried out primarily by the forces of the 1st and 2nd companies of the 561st battalion. Since the battalion received reinforcements, it coped with the task without any problems ... at 5 o'clock in the morning on April 23, the 1st company attacks the Russians, and by 6 o'clock captures one of the heights. Since all enemy positions are clearly visible from this height, the enemy cannot come to terms with its loss. At about 8 o'clock in the morning, the Russians launched a counterattack, they manage to recapture this position ... The trenches and trenches are being dug up by heavy artillery. In their place, a field appears, consisting of only funnels. Russians and Germans often lie in neighboring craters, so that you can not only throw a grenade at the enemy, but even hear the conversation. Daily and hourly battles exhaust the soldiers. They have a particularly bad effect on the psyche ... May 21 and 22 are especially etched in my memory. The command of the 23rd division demanded to take the heights in order to eliminate the threat to the front. Having some experience, the battalion commander tries to dissuade this order, since it is impossible to capture the height with the available forces. His arguments are ignored. The battalion begins preparations for the operation. The 1st company developed a good plan to capture the height. The Russians are driven back. Their losses, it seems, do not allow a counterattack to be launched ... But the next morning, the Russians launched a hurricane

artillery fire and put heavy infantry units into action. Despite the heroic defense, it was not possible to defend the height. Huge losses again - 75 killed and many wounded. This message does not say a single word about the fact that many of the soldiers were tired of this massacre, and they voluntarily surrendered to the Red Army, preferring to end their war. On May 7, 1944, the soldier Johannes S. crossed over to the Soviet side. On May 22, Rudolf S., Johann Kv. and Josef M. It is noteworthy that at least two of the three defectors were so-called Volksdeutsche and came from lands occupied by Nazi Germany. Also on June 3 and August 15, 1944, Friedrich R. and Josef G. were executed. Nevertheless, the reliability of the battalion was not called into question. However, this does not exclude the possibility that most of the soldiers have ceased to experience their former enthusiasm. They saw the hopelessness of the current situation, which was often accompanied by manifestations of panic fear of the Soviet offensive. It was not yet known what caused greater horror in their souls: the verdicts of courts-martial or the possibility of falling into Soviet captivity. However

the memoirs of the officers of the 329th Infantry Division, which at that moment included the 561st Battalion, indicated that the battalion remained a fully effective combat unit. Obvious "signs of decay" did not prevent him from fighting hard in the summer of 1944, when the German group retreated from Latvia. The following judgment of the investigative service of the German Red Cross is a document that gives a good idea of the general situation, the course of these battles and the fate of the missing: defense south of the Island in the direction of Opochka. The breakthrough was made simultaneously in several places, and the 18th Army was cut off from the 16th Army adjoining it from the south. To avoid encirclement, the 561st Infantry Battalion, in a heavy battle near Baranovchina, which lies 50 kilometers south of Opochka, on July 17, 1944, was forced to retreat and begin moving west. At first he took up a position in Zilupe, but this only lasted a day. The rearguard, which south of Rosenau held the path to Zilupe, was able to recapture one of the regions from the partisans. On July 20, the battalion's positions were moved north of Lake Nirza. But the very next day, with the support of heavy artillery and tank and flying units, the enemy attacked in the direction from Nirca to Ludza. At night, the front line moved back to Stolerovo. The next battle was taken on July 26 at Ratniki, which lie south of Rezekne. When the forces of the 4th Guards Division deeply invaded the German positions, the battalion was forced to leave its positions at night and forcefully pass the burning Rezekne, taking up new positions on the edge of the swamp near Taik. West German authors wrote about these battles: "During the defense against the advancing Soviet 4th Guards Division on July 20-21, the 51st battalion especially distinguished itself, which tried to resist the offensive. The soldiers of this formation had a lot of combat experience." However, if you believe the summary of the command of the 18th Army, then by September only 15 people remained from the entire 561st battalion.

And now let's turn our attention to the 540th battalion, which in January 1943 was almost completely destroyed on the Sinyavin Heights. The remnants of the battalion were returned to Leningrad after the end of the "second battle for Ladoga", in March 1943. The replenished battalion was thrown into the bridgehead in Gruzino, which in all German units by 1943 caused quiet horror. The 540th battalion managed to be delivered to the place only at night with the help of inflatable boats, which had to overcome about 300 meters of the water surface. Herbert T, who was sent to the 540th battalion as a reserve officer in August 1943, described the conditions of his stay in this "lost place" as follows: "The commander of the 4th company made a tour of the battalion positions with me. The main thing was not to make sudden movements. The entire bridgehead consisted of three small hills. All of them were removed from the coast at a distance of barely 100 meters. In its shape, the bridgehead resembled an ellipse. It was even possible to calculate its area without any problems. Ober Lieutenant Ho said prudently

me that everything that was said on one side echoed to the other side of the positions ... In the northeast, where the 2nd and 3rd companies docked, the remains of Soviet soldiers hung on barbed wire. This shock group was supposed to recapture its own trenches, but was left to its own devices ... In the center of the hill there were deep fortifications in which one could hide during artillery attacks ... I was told that the Russians were shooting through the entire bridgehead. As soon as you move, you could be shot... The battalion lay on the bridgehead near Gruzino, which has the most notorious reputation on the entire Volkhov front, for more than one year. The break came only in January 1943, when the battalion was transferred to repel the Soviet offensive on the Sinyavin Heights. There he was almost completely destroyed.

The "bloody price" paid by the battalion in the hills near Gruzino can be calculated by examining the documents. After 435 men were missing in the battalion on 1 February 1943, on 1 April 1943 this number was reduced to 49 men. The shortfall was made up by transports of recovered soldiers, who arrived from Skierniewice at the beginning of spring. Over the next months, transports with replenishment came more than once, but this did not change the situation - the losses grew, and the battalion could not fully recover. As of June 1, 1943, 130 people were missing in the battalion; on August 1, 1943, the number of "vacancies" increased to 283 people. Herbert T. wrote in his memoirs that despite the huge losses and tragedy on the Sinyavino Heights, the soldiers of the battalion

made a good impression, they were disciplined and ready to "pass the test." "In the trenches they walked only in helmets, but at the same time they saluted, observed subordination. Strong part. Despite the small space, they were engaged in drill training (!) On the anniversary of the October Revolution, soldiers of the 1st company set up a flag with a swastika in front of the Russian positions. It wasn't that hard to install, but it was dangerous to take it back. Politics is here, politics is here! In general, I want to say that the soldiers took the test very seriously. For all the previous time, I did not meet a single person about whom it could be said that he could defect to the side of the enemy. Now we were wallowing in the mud of the Eastern Front, and the Russians periodically called us to their side ... Slowly, but steadily, the moment of the Russian winter offensive was approaching. Those who reminisced about the past year were filled with uneasiness. At Gruzino we lay under a hail of bullets and constantly suffered losses. But love for the motherland to some extent protected us. But we felt that the war was covering us with its oblivion. This uncertainty soon receded. On January 8, 1944, we were removed from this accursed bridgehead."

The transfer of the battalion was directly related to the expected Soviet winter offensive, which was supposed to remove the blockade from Leningrad. As already happened in January 1943, a year later, in January 1944, the 540th battalion was again sent to the Sinyavin Heights. From Chudovo to Mga, transportation went by rail, and then by trucks. Herbert T. wrote about this last leg of the journey: "I was sitting in the driver's cab, and therefore I saw our path. Thank God, our soldiers did not see much. Anyone who has ever traveled along this road to the front line will never forget this road. The soldier's cemetery was replaced by another soldier's cemetery. And so on both sides of the road. The wooden cross followed the wooden cross! Fantasy painted terrible pictures of the future. Suddenly, a shot rang out behind me. Three soldiers were wounded. They were unloaded. I don't know if it was a "crossbow" or if they were court-martialed. The last kilometers had to be moved on foot.

Already on the front lines, the soldiers of the 540th battalion discovered that they were by no means located in the vicinity of Sinyavino. This happened because the Soviet offensive, unlike in previous years, was not frontal, aimed precisely at the Sinyavin Heights. The Red Army was advancing from two sides, intending to pincer the German units. For this reason

the army leadership decided to send the 540th battalion to one of the most dangerous areas, which was located southwest of Leningrad. It was here that on January 14 the strike of the 2nd Soviet shock army, which was advancing from Oranienburg in a southerly direction, and the 42nd army, which launched an attack from Leningrad on the left flank of the 18th German army, fell. The search team of the German Red Cross, already familiar to us, reported in one of the documents: "The main battles took place near the town of Kipen, which was located 30 kilometers southwest of Leningrad. It was defended by the forces of the 126th Infantry Division and the 540th Battalion sent here. On January 19, five kilometers to the north near Ropsha, a meeting of two advancing Soviet armies took place, the 126th Infantry Division and the 540th Grenadier Battalion subordinate to it were surrounded. The next night, in a heavy battle, the German units managed to break through the ring and break out to the south in the direction of Gatchina and Vokhonov. Those who returned to Germany reported this episode: "It was the most difficult battle that we managed to survive. All companies advanced separately and died in the offensive. The biggest losses were 15 kilometers from Gatchina. Until the end of the month, only the remnants of the division were able to get to the rear in Narva. During these battles, the 540th battalion suffered the biggest losses.

From the documents of the 18th Army it follows that the 540th battalion lost more than 500 people in just a week and a half. As of January 21, 1944, there were only 40 people in it. The report of Herbert T. allows us to conclude that such high losses were precisely the result of fierce fighting, and not the result of voluntary surrender to Soviet captivity. A former soldier of the 4th company of the 540th battalion wrote after the war: "We changed our location for three days, until we finally crossed paths with sergeant major Schwab. We intended to search the dugouts for at least some supplies, and then continue on our way. But halfway we were covered by Russian artillery. We, like savages, panicked back into the trenches. The center of impact fell to the right, where the 3rd company was located. Russians are here



razed to the ground all the fortifications. And then the Russian infantry went. We tried to shoot back, but the Russians crushed our defenses. Then our artillery opened fire on enemy positions. We went on a counterattack, during which the company commander was killed. The Russians repulsed our advance without difficulty. We ended up in our own trenches, where everything was mixed up. Almost all of my colleagues were killed. Someone was lying in the dugout, and someone was in front of him. I will never forget the mad look of the surviving soldiers, whose white winter uniforms were brown with mud... In our sector, the Russians never achieved a major success, but the front near Leningrad collapsed. The pilots were the first to fly. In those days, the 2nd Luftwaffe Field Division was called nothing more than the 2nd Fugitive Division. When, after two days of waiting, nothing happened, we began to retreat.

Within a month, the almost completely destroyed battalion was replenished. The last replenishment came in early June 1944. And a few days later, on June 12, 1944, an order came from the headquarters of the 18th Army: "It would be advisable to postpone the use of the 540th for 10 days, and then send it to one of the active units." An important task for the battalion was found first in the 83rd and then in the 21st Infantry Divisions. The battalion was again thrown into the most difficult sector, so it was not surprising that in August it was again withdrawn from the front for replenishment. This time, the remnants of two "test battalions" of the Luftwaffe acted as replenishment. After that, the 540th battalion actually always remained at the forefront. At that time, the battalion was a kind of "protective detachment", which took on fleeting battles. In September 1944, one of the documents of the German Red Cross stated: "In August 1944, superior Soviet forces pushed the 18th Army to the west of Latvia. In September 1944, she was forced to retreat to Riga. The situation of the "North" group is so critical that both armies are forced to retreat from Riga to Courland. During this retreat, the 20th Army Corps, consisting of the 2nd Division and the 540th Grenadier Battalion, which is an operational reserve, were to occupy the vicinity of Tõrva Valk when the enemy

attacked east of Embach, in the area of Lake Vritz and Valka. The Soviet infantry and tank units, which are constantly replenished with fresh forces, managed to break through the front in several places. South of Tõrva, the 540th Grenadier Battalion, avoiding the threat of encirclement, was forced to retreat to Ergem, which lies 15 kilometers northwest of Valk. During heavy fighting on September 19-20, 1944, the battalion was defeated. Communication between the remnants of individual companies is lost.

In October 1944, it was decided that the remnants of the 540th Battalion would be reorganized into the 285th "Test Command". In November 1944, the 539th "test team" will be created from the wreckage of this team and the 560th battalion.

At the end of 1944, the disintegration of the battalions became an irreversible process. If you look at the documents, we will see that for the period from the beginning of 1942 to the middle of 1944, from one to three cases of desertion were recorded per quarter. At the end of 1944, at least 15 sentences were handed down under this article per quarter. During the first quarter of 1945, the number of sentences for deserters reached 27. The "decomposition processes" were also expressed in the steadily growing number of defectors, which was inherent in all battalions. All this led to a decrease in the combat capability of the battalions.

When on August 29, 1944, Colonel-General Schörner, appointed commander of the North group, ordered the execution of two non-commissioned officers and seven soldiers from the 563rd People's Grenadier Division, this demonstration event was intended to maintain discipline in this part. No less harsh measures were taken against the Spanish Legion, an elite formation that was known as the Blue Division. The Spaniards were just next door to the 561st and 540th battalions. The behavior of the Spaniards, who were constantly in reserve, unpleasantly struck the Germans. One of the documents openly emphasized: "In view of political developments, it seems necessary to pay special attention to the behavior of the Spaniards." Already on January 5, 1944, the command of the 18th Army reported on the state of the Spanish Volunteer Legion: "After the withdrawal of the Spanish Volunteer Division from the front, more than 100 people must be sent back to Spain. For the most part, these are people who had certain difficulties at home, and therefore, as

exit, they decided to join the Legion. Unreliable elements wormed their way among them. In the past, the selection of volunteers was carried out more carefully. It is hoped that, under the determined leadership of Colonel Navarro, the Spanish Legion will be purged of unreliable elements. Without a doubt, the legion has not grown to the level to be used in combat operations accompanied by powerful artillery preparation, as well as in defensive battles against tank units.

And two weeks later, General Matzki, commander of the 28th Army Corps (which at that time included the 540th Battalion) reported: "The Spaniards should not be used in battles. I ask for their removal from the corps." This request was confirmed by the combat log of the 18th Army: "January 26, 1944. The army informs the group headquarters of its intention to evacuate the Spanish Legion to Pleskau, where it will be placed at the disposal of the army group headquarters. The reason for this lies in the fact that, contrary to the expectations of the officers, it was not possible to bring up a cohesive combat unit from the legion. As a result of 3 weeks of use, the Spaniards showed only indiscipline and unreliability. According to the army headquarters, the further use of the legion can lead to dire military consequences.

As a result, it was decided to replace the Spaniards with 500 battalions, which, despite everything, continued to be considered reliable, combat-ready formations, which in some cases even acquired a specific "elite" character. Although in the battalions from the very beginning there were such soldiers who, for various reasons, sought to avoid participation in the battles. But even with the unconditional growth of "subversive moods," they could not seriously threaten discipline in the battalions.

### Chapter 3

#### Changes in the system of punishments

On July 20, 1944, immediately after the failure of the assassination attempt on Hitler, organized by Claus von Stauffenberg, Heinrich Himmler, by order of the Führer, was appointed commander of the reserve army. In Western and Russian historiography, it is often emphasized that the appointment of Himmler to the post of army commander, in which he replaced Colonel General Fromm, who was involved in the conspiracy, was the result of a failed conspiracy, a tragic mistake that saved Hitler's life. In this regard, emphasis was placed on the assertion that the interests of the army circles were at odds with the interests of the NSDAP and the subordinates of the SS party. But for some reason, no one took into account the fact that it was army circles who, long before the assassination attempt on Hitler, insisted on the new appointment of the Reichsführer SS. Taking into account the steadily increasing losses on the Eastern Front, on June 30, 1944, Chief of the General Staff Zeitzler urged the Führer to appoint Himmler to the position of "dictator", whose scope of activity included commanding the army of the reserve and conducting general mobilization, which, in the general's opinion, could contribute to the success of total war. Himmler's appointment to a new post significantly expanded the capabilities of the German repressive apparatus. This actually meant blurring the line between the three pillars of the Third Reich: the NSDAP, the SS and the Wehrmacht. It is worth recalling that simultaneously with the appointment of Himmler, Goebbels also received a new post, who became the Imperial Commissioner for the conduct of total military use. Their tasks included the ultimate mobilization of all available forces in Germany.

As expected, changes in the military penal system were not spared either. The changes took place in September 1944 on the personal initiative of Himmler. The first activity concerning those convicted by military courts concerned the administration of the Ems camps. On September 5, 1944, Himmler issued an order to the military courts of the reserve army. It stated that the execution of punishments, without any exceptions, should be oriented towards the conduct of war.

"1. Soldiers and members of the armed forces who have been sentenced to imprisonment or equivalent punishment leading to the loss of civil rights should no longer

to be handed over for execution of punishment in the hands of the general justice. In the future, they must be transferred a) either to the prisoner companies of the field prisoner units, 6) or transferred by the secret state police to concentration camps to serve their labor service. The decision on the type of execution of punishment is made by the appropriate commander or judge. Convicts who have previously been handed over to the general authorities must immediately be handed over to the command of the military districts.

Although the order cited above initially applied only to units of the reserve army, gradually its effect extended to all combatant units of the ground forces, and later units of the Luftwaffe and the navy. Henceforth, all convicted soldiers and officers were sent not to the Ems camps, where they had the opportunity to enlist in the 500th battalions, but to the newly created field prison units, which, as can be seen from the order, consisted of prison companies. Such a step made it possible from the very beginning to use the prisoners for military purposes. Now the convicts had no prospect of passing the "test". The new type of punishment in the documents was listed as "interim detention P". This rule applied to virtually all prisoners of the Ems camps. "Retroactively" they could be enlisted in the prison companies or transferred to concentration camps. In order to develop common positions among all interested parties: the reserve army, field units, navy, military aviation, military industry and the Ministry of Justice, in October 1944, the Wehrmacht High Command signed

agreement. It read: "In order to introduce general concepts as to which of the convicted soldiers and servicemen of the field and reserve units should be sent to correctional units, to prison companies of field prison units and concentration camps for labor service, the Wehrmacht High Command proposes to check all those imprisoned in Ems camps. This check was to be carried out on the ground by judges, employees of courts and justice bodies. That is, the Imperial Ministry of Justice took on the responsibility of "sorting" all the prisoners into three groups.

This consent of the Minister of Justice depended, among other things, on whether the Ems camps needed "marsh soldiers", that is, whether special convict teams were required to further drain the swamps and dig channels. At the same time, Speer, the Reich Minister for Armaments and War Industry, took advantage of the fact that overnight he was provided with about 2,000 prisoners, whom he "used for military purposes" in the aviation industry "military purposes". But at the same time, Goering and Dönitz were at first unprepared to carry out Himmler's orders. For this reason, some disappointment awaited Himmler, since the number of military tasks involved

prisoners did not meet his expectations.

In any case, the measures taken in September 1944 led to an increase in the strength of the 500th "test battalions". The judges who found themselves in the Ems camps, first of all, paid attention to those prisoners who could be sent to "test formations." Next came the potential "inhabitants" of the prison companies. And only in the last place did it come to the future "labor prisoners" of the concentration camps. This obvious increase in the number of "500th test formations" led not only to the fact that echelons with replenishment immediately reached the 500th, 540th, 550th, 560th and 561st battalions, but also to that new employees began to enter other "test units". According to Himmler's order of September 5, 1944, many soldiers were now sent to battalions even without any time served, which had previously been taken for granted. The path of the "test soldier": court - camp - battalion, was reduced to two mandatory "destinations" of the court and the 500th battalion itself. In particular, Himmler's order stated: "If the decision does not have negative consequences for discipline in the military unit, then the judge has the right to immediately appoint a referral to the probationary unit as a punishment." The High Command of the Wehrmacht decided to keep up with the commander of the reserve army and on February 1, 1945, adopted a similar order. Now any violators of discipline who received no more than 6 weeks of imprisonment were automatically sent to the 500th battalions. Such administrative actions led to the virtual abandonment of the selection criteria for "test soldiers". On the one hand, this

had a positive effect on the number of battalions, but on the other hand, had a negative impact on the spirit of the soldiers and their readiness to "pass the test." This is evidenced by at least the message of Kurt Kolsches, who in November-December 1944 was in Olmütz in the Hindenburg barracks. Kolsches, in his tenure, was convicted of "arbitrarily leaving the unit." Moreover, he aggravated his "guilt" with political statements, for which he eventually received three years in prison. He served his term in Fort Torgau, and then in a prison company. He described those events as follows: "2100 people arrived in the company!?"<sup>31</sup> During the formations, we became aware that every day someone tried to escape to freedom. Each time the company commander pointed out that at the slightest resistance the convict would be punished right there, in the barracks. But the next day, again, someone tried to escape. At night, many of the criminal elements made robbery raids on the neighborhood from the barracks. This led to the fact that Czechs began to be brought to the formations, who were supposed to point out those who committed robberies. It is possible that the mention of daily shoots is

exaggeration, but in any case, these facts indicated that the "test soldiers" who got to Olmütz or Brunn at the end of 1944 were completely unreliable.

Before we return to the battalions, we must dwell on one problem, namely the question of the extent to which the September changes of 1944 affected the fate of former soldiers who ended up in concentration camps. The fact that the new category of concentration camp prisoners in the documents was abbreviated CAB suggests the continuation of the "traditions" of the special units of the Wehrmacht. However, in this case, it was a "special action of the Wehrmacht." In the first part of the book, we talked about the fact that from 1938 to September 1944, from 600 to 1,000 soldiers ended up in the camps. Moreover, almost two-thirds of them came from special units and field penal camps. However, from the documents of the Sachsenhausen camp it follows that at the beginning of 1945 the number of SAW prisoners tripled. In December 1944, there were only 100 of them. In January 1945, there were already 357 of them. There may be two reasons for such an increase. On the one hand, it goes without saying that this was a consequence of Himmler's activities, namely, his order. But, on the other hand, in the camp journal we could find the following entry: "January 1945. The rapid advance of the Red Army and the Western Allies led to the fact that trains with prisoners from other camps constantly arrive in Sachsenhausen. It is possible that other CAB prisoners arrived in these transports, which caused a sharp increase in one particular camp.

At the same time, in February and March in Sachsenhausen we could observe the reverse process - the number of CAB prisoners fell as sharply as it had grown in January. By the beginning of spring, there were no more than a hundred of them left. They were by no means destroyed and not sent to the front. The fact is that the SS leadership decided to gather all the army "criminals" in Buchenwald. It was there that everyone who was to serve "interim detention P" should have been concentrated. In February-March, this applied to those whose term of imprisonment did not exceed one year. In this scheme, Sachsenhausen was just an intermediate station, so to speak, a "transshipment base". It was in Buchenwald that the "old" SAW prisoners began to differ from the "intermediate P" prisoners. From the documents of the museum of this concentration camp it follows that the first "intermediate" began to arrive here in the late autumn of 1944. By March 1945, there were about 800 of them. Almost all of them were located in Dora Mittelbau.

Dora-Mittelbau was the outer camp of Buchenwald. There was an underground production, which until October 1, 1944 was a limited liability company. Armaments and ammunition were produced there. In inhuman working conditions, the legendary V-2 rockets were even produced here.<sup>0</sup> the position of "intermediate" was written by East German researcher Goetz Dieckmann, who mistakenly called them "imprisoned in a fortress": "At the end of 1944, the SS leadership decided to send them to work in the Dora camp a group of prisoners from whom it did not expect any organized resistance. It was about "interim prisoners P", who in the past were members of the Wehrmacht. They wore a red, "political" triangle on their robes, which was turned upside down. In addition, the letter 7 was written on it. According to the SS men, they were optimally suited for

this work, since it postponed their imprisonment in the fortress, to which they were sentenced by the courts-martial. They were supposed to serve their term after the end of the war. They were not threatened with reinstatement in the ranks of the Wehrmacht or early release. At the same time, it was not only about the Germans, but also about representatives of other nations who volunteered to serve in the Wehrmacht or the SS. The first 7 prisoners began to arrive in Dora in November 1944. They were located in a special area of the camp, close to the infirmary. Despite the fact that they wore prison uniforms, they were not forbidden to grow their hair. As you can see, some "benefits" were provided to the "intermediate" in the concentration camps.

When at the end of March 1945 the Dora-Mittelbau camp stopped receiving "intermediate prisoners", this was primarily due to transport difficulties and the chaos that was happening on the German railways. This is confirmed by a telegram that was sent on March 22, 1945 by the Bremen Gestapo to the Hamburg police department: "The prisoners received from the Wehrmacht should be sent to Buchenwald. Due to transport difficulties, this is currently not possible. We ask the Neuengamme concentration camp if they can accept this batch of prisoners." In response, on April 30, 1945, the inspector of the security police and the SD of Hamburg asked: "How many prisoners are we talking about?"

The intention at all costs to put the execution of punishments at the service of a lost war forced Heinrich Himmler to put into practice "intermediate conclusion 1". Under this cipher, soldiers sentenced to death were hidden, but who nevertheless could still perform useful work, for which they were transferred to the Mauthausen concentration camp. First of all, soldiers who owned technical professions got there. In most cases, before the war, they were mechanics, electricians, mechanics. The reason for this step was the state of affairs, when servicemen sentenced to death could pass a "special test" in the 500th battalions, but for a number of reasons this was not possible. The first practice of this kind was applied even before Himmler was appointed commander of the reserve army. On July 17, 1944, the High Command of the Ground Forces sends a request whether the death sentence should be carried out in cases where a "special test" is possible. The answer from the SS was as follows: "In cases where the abolition of the death penalty does not undermine the discipline of the military unit, and the preservation of the soldier himself is expedient due to his ability to work, then it is possible to transfer him into the hands of the local SD."

The first "intermediate prisoners 1" began to appear already in August 1944. Basically, they were deserters and soldiers convicted of "undermining the combat capability of the unit." In isolated cases, they still fell into the 500th battalions, but in most cases they were used in Mauthausen. With regard to the Reichsdeutsche prisoners, the statistics looked like this: October 1944 - 45 people, November 1944 - 71 people, December 1944 - 113. If we take the total number of "intermediate first class", then, respectively, these figures looked like this : 93, 116.156. At the same time, one must proceed from the fact that over the last seven months of the war, about a thousand former Wehrmacht servicemen were sent to concentration camps, that is, approximately as many as in the period from 1938 to September 1944.

#### Chapter 4 Dissolution of the 999th Reserve Brigade

While Heinrich Himmler left the system of special units of the Wehrmacht virtually unchanged, in September 1944, in the role of the Reichsfuehrer SS, he carried out a lot of activities that concerned the "999th test unit". In previous chapters, we have already shown that the emergence of the 999th formation was a kind of compromise between the SS and the Wehrmacht, which was reached in October 1942 in the name of "final victory". But despite the agreement reached, Heinrich Himmler was always suspicious of this venture, since, again, he was losing control over 30,000 prisoners, who were his "classic clientele." The opinion prevailed in the SS that the Wehrmacht underestimated the danger of these people, and therefore treated them "inappropriately". The loss of control over many political opponents and criminal elements put the SS in danger of a certain

loss of power and prestige, which for the Reichsführer SS Himmler was unacceptable. But he did not intend to share his powers with the Wehrmacht.

Now, two years after the creation of the 999th formation, Heinrich Himmler, as commander of the reserve army, gave the order on September 14, 1944 to disband the 999th

reserve brigade, which at that moment was located at the Baumholder training ground. At the same time, he in every possible way prevented the direction of transports with reserves for the 999th field battalions. The reason for such measures was the actions of the "political" 999s, who in the summer of 1944 decided to prepare an armed uprising. While in the eyes of the Wehrmacht command the 500th battalions appeared as a completely justified experiment, the 999th battalions looked completely different. On July 10, 1944, the commander of Army Group E, to whom approximately 85% of all existing 999th field battalions were then subordinate, reported: "From the reports of the command of Army Group E, it follows that the preservation of the 999th battalions in the southeastern region due to their extreme unreliability is inappropriate."

The fact that "extreme unreliability" was the result of the activities of the "political" 999s follows from a letter from the command of the 41st Fortress Division, which included four 999th battalions (11, Sh, ŷU, MP). The division commander pointed out that "as long as the 999th battalions will contain political prisoners who spread communist ideas of refusing to fight, their combat use is risky." The lack of combat forces did not allow for the final dissolution of these battalions. Army officials had to be content with arrests, executions, and tight control over the 999s, which was accompanied by indoctrination. However, these were far from conditional measures. In the Peloponnese, it got to the point where 250 of the "most unreliable elements" were selected from the 999th battalions and transported back to Germany. How tragic these circumstances were, one of the former 999s said: "In August 1944, I somehow received an order to appear before the platoon commander in Achaia. There, with another colleague named Richard Geertz, I was loaded onto a car, which was accompanied by a lieutenant and several sergeants. About ten people were already in the car. Before loading, we had to surrender our weapons. We were brought to the coast, to the location of the 6th company of the 999th battalion, where, together with 80 other soldiers, they pushed us into a huge adit. The exit from it was blocked with barbed wire, to the right and left of it there were sergeants, each of whom had a machine gun. At a meter and a half from the exit of the adit, a rail was thrown. We were told that anyone who stepped over it would be shot on the spot. We were there for several days. During this time, only once they brought us a vat of water and gave us a piece of bread. Then we were loaded onto a train, in which there were only one boxcars with bars on the windows. The door was locked behind us. We heard through it that we were being taken back to Baumholder."

Once in Baumholder, 250 people from this train were swirling in a whirlwind of events that were associated with Himmler's order to disband the 999th brigade that followed a few days later. Let's stop and analyze them in more detail, since an analysis of what happened will reveal an interesting point of view on the entire system of "testing" that the soldiers went through in the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS.

Among the 250 people selected in the Peloponnese was the communist Bastel Hoffeman. He wrote: "On our arrival, the local captain Kastner explained to us that we were completely out of hand and we would be sent to a concentration camp. A few weeks later, Captain Kastner returned and declared that we had another chance to be fit. All this time we were locked in barracks. We only left them to eat, but even then we were escorted." According to the memoirs of the Social Democrat Helmut Dietz, 999 were interrogated for several days. During interrogations, he denied all the charges against him: "There was a post in front of our barracks. We were called one by one and subjected to interrogations. They tried to accuse us of cowardice and ties with the partisans." Walter Köster, another one of the 999, was surprised that none of the arrivals were punished. "Even the most modest disciplinary sanction was not issued." Then it became obvious that they were all being prepared for a show trial, handover to the police and

directions to a concentration camp. Something similar already happened in the spring of 1944, when 450 "political" 999s were disarmed on the southern sector of the Eastern Front, which were immediately sent to Baumholder. But since, with the exception of isolated cases, no specific charges could be brought against these 450 soldiers, they were all sent back to "pass the test." As the commanders of the 999th field battalions began to resort to targeted executions, which were some kind of "general cleansing activities", reproaches began to be heard against the reserve units that picked up soldiers. But in the end, after the war, Captain Kastner, mentioned above, said with relief that he "managed to save two echelons with political prisoners from southern Russia and Greece, which he had to hand over to the police." In addition to the unreliable soldiers "decommissioned" from Greece, there were two more groups of 999s in Baumholder. On the one hand, these were recently delinquent soldiers who were being trained. They were soon to be assigned to the 999th field battalions. On the other hand, these were the wounded 999s, which could no longer serve. Karl Kastner reported the following about this: "The last major call-up to the 999th reserve training battalion took place on September 1, 1944. Then we received about 100 men aged 40 to 55 years. When the American and British units began to approach the German borders from the west, the training of our battalion was suddenly stopped. Of able-bodied men, two operational battalions were formed. In mid-September they were sent to the Western Front to build fortifications. The remaining people were assigned to my company"

Here it should be noted that the creation of the 999th operational battalion, intended for the construction of fortifications, did not take place in a normal way, as described by Karl Kastner. The appearance of the first 999th operational battalion occurred through the banal disarmament of the 999th engineer-construction battalion. For this, a large forest area was chosen. As one of the participants in these events recalled: "There we had to line up and hand over our weapons. The officers picked it up. We no longer had rifles. Only officers and non-commissioned officers had weapons. In total, there were 18 rifles and two light machine guns per company. When we entered the forest, we thought that we would be shot there." The second operational battalion mentioned by Kastner, despite the loud name, was just a bunch of builders who worked under escort. No wonder - "unreliable elements" got into the 999th. However, one dark place remains in history. It is still not clear whether the disarmament of the 999th battalions took place on the orders of Himmler, or whether it was an initiative of the army ranks.

Actually, the 2nd 999th operational battalion was formed from soldiers who were still undergoing training. Herbert Kissling, who served in the 3rd training company, recalled: "We were firing for two hours when the order arrived to return to the barracks. We immediately headed back. But this time we were accompanied by a large number of shooters. When we were lined up, people began to call out. Most of those called out in the past were political prisoners. My name was not called, so I parted ways with my friends. They did not name very many political ones. What happened? Those who were summoned were ordered not to go to lunch. When I returned from the dining room, the foreman called me. He sat at his desk and leafed through my file. Behind him stood the company commander and poked his finger at some of the pages. Finally, the sergeant-major told me that I should remain in the barracks, and after the lights out, join the company by company, whose name was shouted out at the formation. Then we learned that approximately 400 people were being transferred to another unit."

Most likely, Herbert Kissling belonged to those soldiers from which Captain Kastner's company was composed. At the same time, the report insistently emphasized that not only performance and the level of unreliability were used as a selection criterion. On the further fate of this company, which eventually turned into the 999th assembly point, Karl

Kastner reported: "On September 20, 1944, two Gestapo officers unexpectedly appeared in my office: Moshe and Wegener. They informed me that they had an order: to select 300 able-bodied people and send them to Buchenwald. I directed them to the commander of the 999th reserve brigade, Colonel Moser. I informed my commander that the employees of the 999th assembly point were sick and

need rest. Some of them have already signed petitions for the re-assignment of the status of "worthy service." And the question of sending them to the Buchenwald concentration camp had never been raised before. Colonel Moser held the same point of view, and therefore immediately telephoned the command of the XII military district in Wiesbaden, trying to persuade him to cancel this order. Despite this, he received an answer that the order to send 300 people to Buchenwald was lowered from above, and therefore it must be carried out without delay. Since I saw in this order a violation of all instructions regarding the "test units", I demanded a written order for the implementation of this unprecedented sanction, which I eventually received from the commander of the 999th brigade.

Indeed, in September 1944, "Special Instructions" were adopted for the 999th battalions. It was on the basis of their 300 people were sent to Buchenwald. The instructions said:

"a) on the basis of careful observation, to identify incorrigible soldiers with an anti-state way of thinking or criminal inclinations, remove them from active service and hand them over to the police and justice authorities. If there are no prerequisites for disciplinary sanctions and judicial punishments, then the period of observation of soldiers should be at least three months;

6) if there are soldiers who, due to injury, illness or an accident, are fit for non-combatant service or generally unfit for military service, then it is necessary to check whether it is possible to re-apply for their rehabilitation and restoration in the status of "worthy service". If there are no reasons for their rehabilitation, and they have not completed their term, then they should be transferred to the hands of the justice authorities. If they no longer have to serve their sentences, they should return to their civilian professions. If at the same time they turned out to be politically unreliable, then they should be handed over to the police."

On September 4, 1944, the general for special assignments under the High Command of the Ground Forces makes a note: "Transfer to the police in order to use them for hard and dangerous work until demobilization. Worthy soldiers of the 500th and 999th battalions, who, despite written warnings, were again subjected to disciplinary action, are considered incorrigible, and therefore unacceptable for the Wehrmacht.

When Himmler, as commander of the reserve army, gave the order on September 5, 1944, it no longer spoke of a careful three-month observation, or a second disciplinary sanction, or a written warning. This document, addressed to the military courts, contained the words that "those convicted of deliberate acts in the probationary units should be punished by the court by imprisonment or recognition as uneducated, after which they should be transferred by the judges into the hands of the secret state police for transfer to concentration camps."

Probably, interpreting this order, on September 16, 1944, the command of the XII military district (Wiesbaden) decided to disband the 999th reserve brigade. Now the 999s located in Baumholder, which could not pass the "test", and therefore were still considered "unworthy of service", had two options: either to end up in disarmed operational battalions, or to get to Buchenwald. The last way was ordered for all patients and

"political".

At the same time, it seems unlikely that such an action was carried out by the command of the KhP military district by mistake or oversight. As far as is known, after Captain Kastner intervened, Major Raeder, who was in charge of interaction with the 999th Reserve Brigade at the headquarters of the military district, made it clear to Colonel Moser that this was an order from above. However, there is reason to believe that this was ordinary arbitrariness. This conclusion is prompted by a letter from lawyer Richard Kaspari dated August 6, 1946, when the case of the 999th reserve brigade was considered: "After July 20, 1944, the reserve brigade was disbanded by Himmler. However, no decision was made about the employees of the brigade. In this regard, the command



The military district in Wiesbaden decided that some, the most suitable, should be sent west to strengthen the Siegfried Line, and all the rest should be sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp.

The position stated above, that it was the ability to work, and not political reliability, that served as the selection criterion, speaks of the fact that, in addition to the "political" ones returned from Greece, the sick and wounded were sent to Buchenwald. However, it seems unlikely that political criteria were not taken into account in this matter. It is equally unlikely that those "fit for non-combatant service" were suddenly sent to build the "Siegfried Line". With a certain degree of probability, it can be argued that the political component was in the first place here. This is confirmed by orders in which the command of the 999th field battalions was notified of the upcoming "event". In a letter dated September 15, 1944, the commandant of the "Eastern Aegea", to whom numerous 999th battalions were subordinate, reported: "According to the adjutant commander of the 999th reserve brigade (Baumholder), in the near future they will be transferred to special penal units or sent by the police to concentration camps. The possibility of transferring to the Todt Organization or other institutions is no longer considered."

Karl Kastner wrote about those sent from Baumholder in the direction of Buchenwald. "On September 24, 1944, the first transport with 280 people left under the leadership of Oberleutnant Yortel. It was followed on October 2 by a second echelon with 160 people under the leadership of a sergeant major. The first transport was accompanied by the Gestapo officers I mentioned, Moshe and Wegener. Upon their arrival at the Buchenwald concentration camp, they again returned to Frankfurt and sent a message from their department. In the office of the brigade commander, they told me that all the people were taken to the camp as soon as possible, where they were distributed to the military enterprise. Since I did not know that weapons were produced in Buchenwald, I convinced my soldiers that they were being sent to the camp for a short time. From there they will be sent home. But in the camp, the soldiers were shaved bald, dressed in prison uniforms, that is, they were completely equated with prisoners, although they were at the front in southern Russia and Greece for several months, and some even caught malaria there. Oberleutnant Hörstel called me from Weimar and gave me an exact description of the unfortunate situation of our people. By telephone, I tried to contact the adjutant of the commandant of Buchenwald and obtain the release of my soldiers, but all was in vain. He only informed me that after a six-month stay of the soldiers in the camp, a "recheck" could be carried out in order to select those worthy of passing a special test. Release without a command from above was out of the question. On the eve of the soldiers' departure from Baumholder, I promised the soldiers freedom and a speedy return to their families, but they again found themselves behind barbed wire, where hard work awaited them at a defense enterprise.

What guided Captain Kastner when he gave the political 999 a promise of freedom remains unclear. In any case, such promises were unfounded. The first transport with soldiers reached Buchenwald on September 27, 1944, which follows from the message of Max Felsch, who was expelled just a few days earlier from the convalescent company with the order to "keep bed rest for two weeks". IN

The Buchenwald camp file kept the same date of arrival of the 999s, which were marked as "arrested by the police", indicating significant interference in this matter by the Frankfurt Gestapo. This is also mentioned in the message of Max Felsch: "On September 27 we arrived in Buchenwald and were transferred to the camp. We were directed to the quarantine block, which was half filled with hungry Hungarian Jews. At each roll call, it turned out that one or more of them were dying. There I met a lot of old friends, including Walter Barthel from Berlin"<sup>1</sup> When I asked why we were sent here, he said that he didn't know for sure, but they said that we were sent to the camp at the suggestion of the Frankfurt Gestapo."

The German communist Walter Barthel led an underground international organization in the Buchenwald concentration camp, with which Friedrich Pitruska quickly made contact. Friedrich Pitruska, like Max Felyp, arrived at the camp on the first transport. Prior to that, he was in Baumholder, where he underwent treatment after being wounded at the front.

After recovery, he ended up not in the regular part, but in the camp. He wrote about his arrival in Buchenwald: "We were lined up in front of the administrative building. I remember that the crematorium smoked terribly, and we suffocated in this fumes. In the dark we were taken to the shower room, where we stayed for three days. Nobody remembered us. We were forced to sleep on the stone floor. Comrades who had already spent several years in the camp were able to get me out of there. A hail of questions immediately rained down on me: how did I get here? how is it outside? when will this shit end? Is the population ready to resist? And many others. Comrades tried to supply us with food, but what they got for 270 people was very little. The first thing my comrades told me was that Ernst Thalmann was killed here in the camp.

One day we were ordered to undress and line up in the yard. All our personal belongings were taken from us. I was given trousers and a jacket with a large red Star of David on the back. No shirt, no socks, no boots, just a jacket with a red triangle and the number 73366. We were placed in the so-called quarantine block number 43. For bedding we received a paper bag that looked like a cement bag, only longer. Comrades who noticed I had a jacket with a star on it immediately arranged other clothes for me. They even gave me a shirt. We had to sleep five of us on the same bed."

Fritz Berger, another soldier who arrived in the same echelon, speaks of a group of "politicals" of 258 people who were sent in six wagons from Baumholder to Buchenwald. He recalls that he had to work for several days in the ruined Gustloff camp, which adjoined Buchenwald. It saved them. There is information from a soldier from the second, smaller echelon. These are the memoirs of the Hanoverian communist Willy Ruf, who at the end of September 1944, after being wounded during an air raid, was sent for treatment to Baumholder. When he began to recover, he did everything possible not to return to the front. He feigned stomach trouble. "When I returned to Baumholder again, I was ordered to surrender everything - even the gas mask and belt. There was no more service. There was a strange mood among my friends. We even had to hand over food allowance books. One evening, during formation, one of the colleagues asked Captain Kastner: "Herr captain! I heard that we are being sent to a concentration camp." "No," the officer replied. - You are sent to your families, since you have already paid your debt to the Fatherland. If someone blurts out about a concentration camp again, I will put him in a guardhouse." A few more days passed, when in the afternoon we were again lined up. Captain Kastner proclaimed: "You are going to Weimar to the assembly point, where you will be disbanded." He cheerfully gave the command: "To the right! March with song! But no one began to sing, as they saw that a well-armed group of sergeants was arriving. They took us to the Baumholder station, where we were loaded onto an army train. Then we thought that the guards were attached so that no one would fall off the train. And we went - I remember there were about 200 of us

man - towards a goal that was not even expected. We got from Baumholder to Weimar in a day and a half. There we were met by the camp orchestra - only prisoners played in it. A sign gleamed on the gate: "To each his own." We were taken to the shower room. There we collapsed on the floor and fell asleep from fatigue ... We were dressed as prisoners of a fascist concentration camp. We were dressed like ragamuffins: jacket, trousers, a pair of boots and a prisoner's cap. Before we arrived at our barracks, we saw him being cleaned. We saw creatures dying of hunger that resembled humans. They were taken out of the barracks and put into a truck. They were wearing clothes. We also did not have an extra gram of fat, but these people could no longer walk on their own - two other prisoners brought them to the truck. We were told about other prisoners who had been in Buchenwald for a long time. It was about the Jewish hospital in which we were supposed to settle. It was rumored that these prisoners were gassed and their bodies burned... Now we met with friends from among the 999 who had been living here for two weeks. We were not assigned any work. We only had to line up for roll call in the morning and evening. There was too little food for life, but just right to die. We slept and watched as one day followed another."

The above reports show that Captain Kastner, thanks to the head of the echelon, Oberleutnant Yortel, was correctly informed about the fate of the former 999s. Further actions

captains are rather atypical. He himself described them in one of the documents: "Herr Major Moser, since after sending the second echelon to Buchenwald you took a four-week vacation, and the brigade adjutant was forced to go to Munich, I, as a senior officer, was the commandant for several days. Since I felt guilty for the fate of 440 soldiers who, on the orders of Himmler or one of his employees, were sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp, on October 2, 1944, I dictated to the corporal the order for their dismissal from the Wehrmacht and sent him to Buchenwald. According to this order, all soldiers sent on the echelons must be released, since they were demobilized. Oberleutnant Yortel must return everyone to Baumholder. I personally signed this order and provided it with the seal of the brigade. At the same time, I signed an order to allocate money to the demobilized so that they could return home. These funds, together with the order, were transferred by Lieutenant Yortel to the commandant of Buchenwald. After receiving the order, the commandant agreed to the release of our people. The 999s were gathered from all over, dressed in military uniforms, and after appropriate instructions from Oberleutnant Yortel, they were released into the wild. With a small team of soldiers and an echelon escort in mid-October 1944, Oberleutnant Yortel arrived back at Baumholder.

This development of events is confirmed in the main points by the stories of former Buchenwald prisoners. On the evening of October 5, in Buchenwald, a command was heard through the loudspeaker: "Tomorrow early in the morning, all military personnel from Baumholder are lined up in front of the gate." Max Felsh recalled: "When we gathered at the gate early in the morning in striped prison rags, the Oberleutnant came up and grunted in surprise: "You are being released, but you are still not dressed." We were amazed - is it really true!

The memoirs of Friedrich Pitrusky said that a few days before they were built by the commandant of Buchenwald. "Once all the 999s were lined up in front of the gate. We stood between the administration building and the bear cage. He came out in a leather coat and wanted to know what we ate. He yelled: "They came here as lambs of God, but I would like to know how you got here?" We stood for several hours. In the afternoon, the commandant came out again, still dressed in a leather cloak, accompanied by two SS men. "We learned that you were sent here by mistake. However, the local climate would be well suited to make decent people out of you again. From the dais, he shouted that everyone would leave the camp, that we should thank the Fuhrer for this favor.

How the liberation took place on October 6, 1944, an eyewitness describes in his memoirs: "They shouted out a name and a number. My shirt number was 26238. The callees had to move to the left. Of the 258 people from the first echelon, 78 names were first named. All of them were recruited in camps and prisons. They, accompanied by guards, marched down along the barbed wire. Everyone else was given tickets and released. I don't even remember if they gave us any money or not. I remember that they shouted to us: away, away! On October 9, I was back in the city."

The above description given by Fritz Berger applies not only to the soldiers who arrived at the camp with the first transport, but also to all 999 from Baumholder. This is confirmed by the Buchenwald file cabinet and the memoirs of Willy Ruf, who mistakenly called the Oberleutnant "escort". "In the first half, we were suddenly lined up in front of the goal. The senior lieutenant from the convoy explained to us: "All those whose names I name will leave the camp. Everyone else will return to Baumholder. You will again receive a military uniform and go to your homeland, from where you were drafted into the army. It's 11 o'clock in the afternoon, hurry up to catch the station. Anyone who stays in the camp after 2 p.m. runs the risk of staying here for a long time." We quickly threw off our prison rags and put on military uniforms, since no one wanted to stay in a concentration camp. Someone was in such a hurry that they grabbed two left or two right army boots. But no one paid any attention to this. The main thing was to leave the camp. Get out of this damned place! At the station, everyone was at half past one, everyone jumped on the first train that came across. It didn't matter where he was going, the main thing was to get away from Weimar and this terrible camp. The next day I arrived at Klein-Berkel in the vicinity of Hameln. This is where my whole family was evacuated. The next day I went to Hannover, so t

turn in your uniform. I had a demobilization document. Date, stamp, collection point P, Weimar. And no mention of Buchenwald!

About further events in Baumholder, where some of the soldiers rescued from the camp went, and there were still about a hundred other 999s, Captain Karl Kastner said: "I prevented subsequent attempts to send my soldiers to Buchenwald by breaking them into small groups of operational battalion or even just let go home. Since the released 999s were supposed to be in their homeland in the passport office, very soon questions poured in on me why these soldiers were demobilized, although they were drafted into the Wehrmacht only on September 1, 1944. I managed to calm these vigilant warriors, as I answered that it was a question of a special action, which involved the dissolution of the camp in Baumholder. At that time, mail went for weeks, and my service in February 1945 was transferred to Torgau, and in April 1945 to Velden in Bavaria, so I could be calm about the fate of my soldiers.

Indeed, only two operational 999th battalions and a couple of small construction companies remained in Baumholder, which mainly consisted of authorized personnel. Nothing is known about the fate of the 999 who remained in the concentration camp.

#### PART 4 The End of the "Test Units" Chapter 1 The 500th Battalions in the New Conditions

When Heinrich Himmler ordered the disbandment of the 999th Reserve Brigade in September 1944, it was no longer a matter of gaining control over the "unworthy of service" who found themselves in the ranks of the Wehrmacht, but of transferring them to the SS. The situation forced Himmler himself to resort to the practice of "Passing tests." In this situation, a special formation of Dirlewanger was implied, which became a "test part" within the Waffen-SS. Forerunner

The order to disband the 999th brigade was an order to transfer about 20 thousand prisoners not to the 500th battalions, as was done earlier, but to the Dirlewanger brigade. It happened at the end of August 1944. And in early September, transports with prisoners from Wehrmacht prisons and Ems camps reached Dirlewanger. The intended goal was detailed in a letter dated December 31, 1944, which the SS judge, SS Standartenführer Bender, addressed to the head of the main SS personnel department: "The direction of military personnel to the special part of Dirlewanger occurs on the basis of the order of the Reichsführer SS, which states that the Dirlewanger brigade should be considered as" test part of the SS. I proceed from the fact that, as I noted during negotiations with the High Command of the Wehrmacht, the test army battalions should be poured into the Dirlewanger brigade.

But, apparently, these negotiations did not reach the intended goal. The idea of disbanding the 500th battalions and infusing their composition into the Dirlewanger brigade ended in failure / Army circles were very opposed to this idea. As a result, Himmler had to be content with having access to convicted servicemen from the reserve army and part of the 999, who, after the dissolution of the brigade, remained "unworthy of service." Altogether, it was about 400 people who were sent to Dirlewanger at the end of 1944. In isolated cases, the 999th fell into the punitive brigade, which; bypassing Buchenwald, managed to temporarily be free. One of them was the communist Ernst Zadovsky from Schwerte, who ended up in Baumholder on September 1, 1944, but was sent to a concentration camp in September of that year. He recalled: "In October 1944, as a soldier, I left Buchenwald. However, on December 27, 1944, together with two residents of Schwerte, I ended up at the Moravian SS training ground, where I was assigned to the combat unit of Dirlewanger. In March 1945 I was sent to the vicinity of Niederlausitz to the river Neisse.

However, the dissolution of the 999th brigade did not finally solve the problem of the penalty box. Over the next few months, the 999th assembly point was formed, where numerous 999th from the field units ended up, who, due to injury, were sent back to Germany for treatment. There was no point in sending them back to the 999th battalions, which were cut off on the islands of the Aegean, or did not dare to break through to Germany through

partisan-controlled Yugoslavia. In this situation, army officials decided that the 999th assembly point, which in February 1945 was transferred from Baumholder to Fort Torgau, should be poured into the 500th battalions, which at that time were being formed in Brunn and Olmütz.

Gradually, about a hundred 999s joined the 500th battalions. At the headquarters of the 500th Reserve Training Regiment, such a replenishment was by no means happy. As a result, the 999th were concentrated in Olmütz in the barracks of Richthofen, and the command was still more concerned about how to protect them from the employees of the 500th battalions. It is obvious that tensions between the two groups of "test soldiers" have existed since the time of Fulda. A number of posts have pointed to this. Wilhelm Litz, who arrived in Olmütz at the end of 1944 as the 999th, recalled: "There I met my old friends. Significant disagreements emerged between the Wehrmacht and the party. The NSDAP demanded our combat use, the army believed that we had a dangerous corrupting effect. As a result, until April 1945, we sat in Olmütz." Something similar was told in 1946 by Paul Behring, also the 999th political prisoner: "A strange picture appeared to us in Olmütz. They tried to combine the 999s and 500s. But since the 500s were sent to dangerous sectors of the front, the 999s became more and more. In order to occupy us with something, the so-called consolidated companies were formed. These companies served and prepared for the defense of Olmütz. From time to time we had to dig anti-tank ditches and pits in the vicinity of the city. As a result, over time, a fairly extensive defense line arose around Olmütz.

The use of a small group of former 999s, which ended up in Brunn, looked somewhat different. This was reported by Heinz Heiss: "To avoid conflicts with the 500s, at the first opportunity, I volunteered to build anti-tank barriers on the slopes of the Moravian Valley ... Here I ran into Anton Komeirk, a Czech bricklayer who was released after three years of forced work in Berlin. Together we started with a pistol stolen from the sergeant major, my own rifle and a stolen box of grenades. We intended to create our own group of red partisans, which would include about 70 people. Meanwhile, the fascist units retreated from Slovakia back to Bohemia. Some of the front-line units continued to conduct rearguard battles. The first to us came across the stage headquarters. From our high belfry we noticed him long before he approached the Moravian Valley. Staff officers arrived with a truck full of tobacco, sugar, alcohol and girls. Now we were provided with stocks of products. We forced the staff to unload food into the quarry, and then locked them in the dungeon of the old castle. Repeatedly, an old soldier from the Landsturm came to our team. He appeared to be about 65 years old. He said that herds stolen in Slovakia were being driven west. The hooves of cows that walked for several days were wounded. We distributed livestock among peasant households. The front passed us. The villages that lay on the mountain slopes east of Brunn fell into the cauldron during the May days. The Red Army surrounded the combat-ready tank division of the Wehrmacht. Every day the ring shrinks. With 13 Czech friends, I was able to escape from the cauldron and cross the front line to the side of the Red Army. But the war is not over for me. I cursed it and couldn't wait for it to end. I participated in the assault on Brunn on the side of the Red Army. I was assigned to be the propagandist who spoke through the loudspeaker. The Red Army soldiers gave me a pass, which I still keep. He gave me an unhindered way home."

The fears of the command of the 500th battalions, which locked the 999th in the barracks, were not groundless. Nevertheless, former political prisoners managed to create a large anti-fascist organization. One of them, the Hamburg communist Oskar Meyer, already in May 1945 reported this in a special letter prepared by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia for German residents: work, the ultimate goal of which was to be an armed uprising in Olmütz as the Red Army approached the Moravian Valley.

Oskar Meyer later said: "In Olmütz, we quickly established contacts with former political prisoners from among the 999s. We managed to establish illegal contacts with Czech anti-fascists, from whom we received operational reports and translated into

german leaflet of the communist party. Our conspiratorial group consisted of 32 people. Our connections stretched even to the guards of the barracks. The group had the password "Kashau", Kashau was the place where the provisional government of the liberated Czech territories was located. Three of these people maintained constant contact with the Czech communists. Oscar Meyer was in charge of personnel management. Kurt Kühles headed the "Mapparat", that is, he was in charge of all military issues. This follows from his message, which details the preparations for an armed uprising": "Comrade Kules was put on military questions. The connection with the Communist Party of the Czech Republic was established after much effort. After that, a plan was developed, which had to be carried out as the Red Army approached. The Communist Party has given us the task of preparing an armed uprising in the city of Olmütz. It was found that the barracks was surrounded by a rampart, which had numerous basements, the so-called casemates. It was in them that the entire arsenal and ammunition of the garrison of the fortress was placed. The protection of these casemates was carried out by a special platoon, which consisted of 999s. Comrade Kules was appointed deputy

platoon leader. Thanks to this, we have the opportunity to transfer the entire arsenal into the hands of the rebels. Some soldiers of the 15th reinforced battery, which was located on the territory of the same barracks and the aircraft factory adjacent to it, were devoted to the plans. The uprising was supposed to start from this factory, from the territory of which the barracks would be captured. With access to weapons, the rebels would gain control of the city. Our contact then was a senior lecturer who lived on the Saarlandstrasse. We agreed that the signal for the uprising would be a white stripe pasted on the glass door of the bank, which was located near the city market. This band meant that all forces were put on alert. But for this it was required that one of the colleagues went over to the side of the Red Army. After conferring, we decided that it would be Comrade Kules. Firstly, he had no family, and secondly, he was well-versed in military matters. We took into account that Hitler gave the order to deal with the relatives of deserters and defectors. At the beginning of March, we handed over the Kashau password to the Red Army." Until early April, everything was going perfectly, but the uprising had to be called off, as on April 20, 1945, most of the 500s and 999s were suddenly ripped off. We will return to these dramatic events a little later.

## Chapter 2 Grenadier Battalions on the Western Front

As mentioned above, the 500th "test units" included the 291st and 292nd grenadier battalions, which were formed on September 10 in Karlsruhe. A month later, they were supposed to be on the front lines as part of the 19th Army. At that moment, the Wehrmacht command was concerned about holding the Western Front along the Antwerp-Luxembourg-Belfort line. Meanwhile, from the German units chaotically retreating from France, new formations were created, which were supposed to be used for the counteroffensive.

In the combat log of the 19th Army, which held the southern sectors of the Western Front, the first mention of the 291st and 292nd Grenadier Battalions dates back to October 13, 1944: "The 64th Army Corps and the 6th Luftwaffe field corps are notified that that one test battalion, each of which consists of 500 people, is attached for reinforcement. Over the next two months, both battalions were often at the front in close proximity. Initially, they were located in the western part of the Vosges, where the 1st French and 7th American armies were approaching the borders of the Reich. The first task of the 291st Grenadier Battalion was to repulse, together with the 106th Tank Corps, the Allied offensive just south of Le Bresse. At the center of the struggle was the strategically important mountain of Hout du Fan. We can read about the course of the battle in the combat log of the 19th Army: "October 19, 1944. South of Les Bresses, at about 1300 hours, their own offensive was launched, the purpose of which was to return the forest area south of Mosellot. Thanks to the grenadiers and artillery fire, in some areas it was possible to go deep 2 kilometers northeast of Cornimon (do Fan). In other places, stubborn enemy resistance. On the enemy side are the 4th and 6th Moroccan mountain rifle regiments, which hold a sector 2.5 kilometers wide. Resumption of own offensive only after a message from the corps that reinforcements will be delivered, since the corps itself no longer has reserves. At 5:30 p.m.

the offensive begins from the highlands of du Fang with the forces of the battalion. Attack repulsed. Own soldiers hold only thanks to artillery fire. In a forest area 1 km north of Ventron, an enemy group was destroyed early in the morning. At the same time, 10 machine guns and 21 grenade launchers were captured. While the 291st battalion held the peak du Fan, the 292nd battalion participated in the battles near Ventron. In this situation, the role of the 106th Tank Brigade is not entirely clear. How could she fight in the mountains? In the mountains it was only possible to use

which was part of the brigade 2106th motorized battalion. It is possible that he fought for the mountain heights just in the middle between the 291st and 292nd battalions.

General A. Guillaume, who at that moment was the commander of the 3rd Algerian regiment, in his article "The Battle for the Vosges" wrote about the bloody battles for du Fan: "October 17th. The French 6th Mountain Regiment completed the capture of du Phan. But in the valley the Germans do not retreat an inch of ground. It's amazing that they didn't seize the moment to strike at us. They drew down every reserve they could muster, including two battalions of political prisoners who were to be tested (read: redeem themselves). The enemy starts a massive counterattack, but it bogs down. Never before have there been such bloody battles. During the fighting, one of the Nazi battalions left up to 70% of its combat strength on the slopes of the mountains. The French 6th Mountain Rifle Regiment lost more than 100 men when conquering the summit, and about 700 killed and wounded during its defense. Since the fire of German artillery intensified, each volley is deadly for our units, which, after the offensive, have not yet had time to build fortifications and shelters. In the forests near Tontua, a group of African commandos lost 92 people.

Since no border actually passed between the German units, it can be argued that the 291st and 292nd grenadier battalions not only suffered huge losses, but played a decisive role in this battle. The mention of the French general that these battalions consisted of "political prisoners" is hardly worth taking into account, since he did not fully understand the specifics of the "test battalions". There is no need to exaggerate the heroic spirit of the "test grenadiers". Heinrich Scheel, a liaison officer from the 1st company of the 291st battalion, recalled when the massive shelling from mortars and howitzers began: "We never dreamed of such a thing. No one had the desire to freeze their ass off. Our captain, the battalion commander, did not get out of the trench at all. He, like us, surrendered, deciding not to accept a heroic death. We didn't want to cling to every piece of land."

Something similar was described by Heinz Shtachowiak, who fought in the 292nd battalion. "During the attack, we were between the French. They were as afraid as we are.

They shouted to us: "The war will end this year. Retreat!" And we retreated. Only Walter Mir was not with us. He remained lying, and he was taken prisoner. Our losses were heavy, but not huge. Our combat readiness was falling before our eyes."

Before we make an attempt to explain why such opposite assessments were given to the 291st and 292nd battalions, we must trace the further combat path of these military formations. After a few days, when the Germans managed to achieve some success, it became clear that the counter-offensive near du Phan had failed. To avoid the collapse of the front, the 269th Infantry Division was transferred from Norway, which received the order "to level the front line west of Le Bresse and south of Kornimont as soon as possible." The grenadier battalions at that moment were too weak to participate in a new operation to seize the mountain bridgehead. Now both "test battalions" were to temporarily occupy defensive lines, in order to then be transferred to a new hot section of the front.

The 291st Battalion was deployed west of Saint-Dieu, where the Allies planned to launch a new offensive. Details can be found in the combat log of the 19th Army: "October 25, 1944. Taking into account the possible offensive of enemy forces on Saint-Dieu, the command of the army corps orders to bring the units available: the 4th Luftwaffe field corps, the 291st grenadier battalion, and the 106th tank brigade.

October 26, 1944. Through a hole in the front north of Rouge, the enemy has been pulling up reinforced units since noon. In the afternoon, the advance detachments of the enemy reach the edge of

forests south of Nompatliz, Burguns and Sosre. In a hard struggle, associated with heavy losses, the 106th tank brigade cuts off the enemy's path to the north. During the counterattack, the 291st battalion manages to advance 2 kilometers north of Rouge. In the second half, another enemy attack is reflected in Rouge.

When the allies managed to break through the German defenses 45 kilometers west of Burguns on October 27, around 11 o'clock, the 292nd battalion was thrown into this sector of the front. On the same day, the forces of this battalion launched a counterattack, which ended at 8 a.m. the next day in the region of the 521st height, on the outskirts of which almost the entire combat strength remained lying. Nevertheless, they managed to capture the height, but this caused another attack by the allies. The blow fell on the right flank. It would seem that the exhausted battalion could not resist the forces of the regiment. The attack was not only repulsed, but also launched a counteroffensive, during which the battalion penetrated 3.5 kilometers into enemy positions northwest of Burguns. On October 30, 1944, the combat log of the 19th Army stated: "Today, at around 10 o'clock, the enemy bypassed a key height a few kilometers from Rougeville with the battalion's forces from two sides. To hold the position of the 16th Infantry Division, the command of the 89th Army Corps transferred the 223rd Infantry and 292nd Grenadier Battalions to this sector. The enemy attack was repulsed."

Somewhat later, a retreat became inevitable. The 929th battalion, covering the retreat of the German units, moved towards Shirmek. Here, the Nazi leadership, in their time, created a "re-education camp", which was located in the immediate vicinity of the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp. In August 1944, the prisoners were "evacuated". Covered from the west, the SS carried out a mass execution of French prisoners from among the members of the Resistance. The rest were taken to Dachau. Those killed by the SS came from exactly the area where the 291st and 292nd battalions had to fight. When the 292nd battalion entered Shirmek, one of its soldiers wrote the following lines in his diary: "Here in Shirmek, the Franktriers22 almost finished us off. We settled in one of the houses, and the bulls, who pulled mortars, since we did not have tractors, were put in one of the stables. In the morning, when we left the house, fire was opened on us from all windows and doorways. Bullets rained down in a hail, so it was unrealistic to pick up the bulls. To save ourselves, we had to run away and leave guns and mortars behind. Half an hour later we were fired upon from our own mortars." In October - early November 1944, traces of the 292nd Special Purpose Grenadier Battalion are actually lost. Only the message of Heinz Weinhold, who served in this battalion, has survived: "We were sent to a new combat area, where we remained for several weeks. Our headquarters was located in Munster (Alsace), and the command post was in Sulzern. There we were able to gently blow off steam ... In late January - early February 1945, I was sent to Troy-Epi, where, west of Colmar, I was wounded by a grenade fragment. I was sent to the military hospital in Emmendingen. The Gestapo was constantly watching me there. I never escaped their control for a moment. The headquarters of the Gestapo was located just opposite my hospital. It was in the hospital that I heard that our battalion temporarily took up a position in Neu-Breisa-he, and the commandant of the city was appointed commander. Before Heinz Weinhold could return to his battalion, he was transferred to another hospital, as the Gestapo feared that he might defect to the Allied side. At that moment, he learned that the 292nd battalion was located in Lara. About the combat readiness of the battalion, Weinhold wrote the following after the war: "I can remember one incident. The subject, who was called either a merchant or a sales agent, hid behind an anti-aircraft machine gun from which he began firing into the air during an air raid by American aircraft. Miraculously, he managed to bring down the attack aircraft. After that, he inflated his chest with a wheel. He expected that he would be pardoned for this feat. He got half of his prison sentence cut off. It was the only case where someone got into rehab. I don't

I can say that this incident was met with enthusiasm. The soldiers continued to serve in the same way as they carried it before.



There really was no reason to raise morale. For three or four weeks, the combat strength of the battalion was reduced to virtually zero. Only after that did the command send reinforcements. The level of losses and their varieties (dead, wounded, captured, defectors, deserters, arrested or executed soldiers) largely determined the mood in the battalions. The soldiers were tired of the war and were ready even for an open protest. This point should be given special attention. It is unlikely that the reinforcements sent could completely restore the strength of the battalion. If we talk about the facts, then a large echelon with replenishment left Brunn in March 1945. The previous transport left for the front only in December 1944. The fate of the March echelon is unknown. There are only memories of a soldier from the December transport. "We were loaded in early December. On a long transport train we rode through our torn homeland. In our car there were only wooden benches. We greedily took seats at windows and half-open doors. Our guards stood at the doorways, which in most cases consisted of non-commissioned officers and sergeants armed with machine guns and rifles. Probably, they also went to the front to undergo a "test". Weapons: rifles, light mortars and faustpatrons and ammunition for them - we should have received only upon arrival at the place. However, we did not know the destination. We drove through Pilsen, Nuremberg, Stuttgart and Karlsruhe. Smoking is strictly forbidden at night. In Cologne we slowly crossed the Rhine. And here is the stop. An order followed, given almost in a whisper: "Out! Line up in two lines. Get weapons and ammo. March!" We saw the guide in the column as a kind of snowdrift. A strange boa constrictor crawled up the mountain. Commands and orders were still whispered. From time to time someone had to be pulled out of deep snow. To light a cigarette, one had to pass the Faustpatron to a neighbor.

"Napas ir! Napas ir! Napas ir! Napa\$ir!"<sup>1</sup>—two blacks stood in front of us. Rifles and machine guns fired. She sounded nearby, but quickly fell silent. We were captured by the American-French troops. We settled comfortably for the night, right in the middle of their positions. At night we stayed among the snowdrifts. In the morning we were taken to a Vosges village. There were tanks, trucks and pontoons everywhere. A fresh army was ready to rush across the Rhine. We were interrogated by an American major. He spoke excellent German, probably was a Jew. He congratulated us on our capture, after which we received several packages of American supplies: dry rations for breakfast, lunch and dinner. In addition, we were given chewing gum, cigarettes, dry alcohol and something like a spirit lamp. So we got the opportunity to drink real coffee beans. Then three trucks (an open-top Studebaker) drove up, after roll call we loaded them up and drove off. It was a terrible trip through the ruined villages and cities. On both sides of the street there were people who shouted threats at us, threw stones, clods of dirt and manure. For them we were the destroyers of their country, the murderers of their sons, wives and children. For them, we were damned Germans, bosses, nemchura. On the evening of December 19 (my birthday) we arrived at POW camp No. 29. It was a huge American camp in the vicinity of Chalonsur-Saul.

As you can see, the capture of German soldiers and their death was facilitated not only by bad weather, difficult territory, but also by the steadily growing disorganization in the work of the Wehrmacht headquarters. All this raises with particular acuteness the question of German losses in the section Le Bresse-Mortagnier-Saint-Dieu. The answer is complicated by the fact that the lists of losses were literally kept by eye. If we talk about the 291st Grenadier Battalion, then the lists of losses cover only the period October 17, 1944 - February 16, 1945, and these documents do not apply to all companies. But if you look at these documents, you can see that in the "grenadier test battalions" the peak of losses occurred in the last three months of 1944. In the 291st battalion, the losses amounted to 462 people, and 270 of them were considered as

"missing" or "possibly captured." In the 292nd battalion, 616 soldiers were missing during the same period, while almost half were perceived as missing. Even if we take into account the difficult terrain of the battlefields, that is, over time, the missing could go into the category of "dead", the number of "missing" (missing, possibly prisoners, etc.) was still very high. This involuntarily leads to the assumption that the "test soldiers" deserted in whole groups or went over to the side of the enemy.

However, the commander of the 19th Army tried in every possible way to suppress such suspicions. Nov. 1

In 1944, he issues order No. 1, in which he reminded that "not only officers should welcome the command car." One of the little things that supposedly was supposed to increase morale in parts. Another trifle was the categorical ban on carrying carbines down the barrel, as this was the "Bolshevik manner". But he took on the deserters especially strictly: "The number of soldiers who go over to the side of the enemy or surrender without a fight is growing. In all these cases, the strictest investigation will be carried out. If necessary, courts-martial will pass sentences in absentia."

On November 7, 1944, another order was issued: "All soldiers must be immediately informed that in the event of an established transition to the side of the enemy or shameful captivity, the coward's relatives will bear responsibility." Indeed, if we take into account the number of "missing" in the 291st and 292nd battalions, it is possible that some of them voluntarily surrendered. This is demonstrated by the example of Heinrich Scheel, who on October 25, 1944 was among those very "uncounted". Scheel, a former member of the anti-fascist organization Red Chapel, said in his memoirs: "I did not fire a single shot at a person in this war. I have always shot only in the air. I did not see a single reason for the Nazi regime to persist even for a second longer than it was destined ... In the vicinity of Saint-Dieu, we were landed on a snow-covered hill and ordered to advance. But we didn't even know where the enemy was. The commander didn't know either. Therefore, he sent four reconnaissance groups, admonishing: "As soon as you notice the movement of the enemy, immediately return and report the situation." I went to the left flank in a group with Erich Christian. We were tired. It was also raining and we were soaked to the skin. We were useless scouts who didn't see anything. We just made sure that the path is clear. And then we came under fire. I had to fall into the mud. One of our group was wounded in the shoulder, and he constantly moaned plaintively. There were nine of us and one non-commissioned officer. The machine-gunner, a little scammer, cried out: "I'll show them now." He got up and fired a burst from a machine gun. A flurry of enemy fire immediately fell upon him. He flopped into cover and made no more attempts to get up ... The non-commissioned officer shouted to us: "We are retreating with a single jerk!" He counted to three and jumped back. No one else went, and we remained lying. The non-commissioned officer was noticed and began to fire. He lay not far from us and asked: "What to do now? We must return. Maybe we should try again?" We thundered in unison: "Maybe it's better to surrender?" Fat Erich Christian murmured: "Why not?" No one dared to take the initiative. But in the end everyone agreed that we should try, even the non-commissioned officer.

Scheel's group was lucky. They found some sticks, tied white handkerchiefs around them. So the "test subjects" were captured by the Americans. On December 12, 1944, the wife of Heinrich Scheel received a letter from the 291st Grenadier Battalion. It said: "Of course, you have already received official notification that your husband, Private Heinrich Scheel, went missing on October 25, 1944. This is the only way I can answer your request. I am very sorry that I cannot give you more joyful news. In the person of your husband, we have lost a very good soldier, true to his military duty. I believe that after the victory your husband will certainly be found. Heil Hitler. Lieutenant Rape.

When the 292nd Grenadier Battalion found itself in a similarly difficult situation in a forested area near Mortagne, Heinz Stachowiak, sentenced to two years in prison "for undermining

combat readiness", decided to take the chance to voluntarily surrender to the Americans. "We didn't know where we were. Someone had to go ahead to investigate." However, the Americans treated the defector with distrust. They believed that Stachowiak was trying to bargain for a good position for himself. There were also more egregious cases.

On October 27, 1944, the command of the 89th Army Corps became aware that one officer and 30 soldiers from the 225th regiment of the 16th Infantry Division had gone over to the side of the enemy with weapons in their hands. While this incident has been investigated for several days, another shocking news comes to the headquarters. "On the right flank of the 225th Grenadier Regiment, the 5th company under the command of a lieutenant in full force passes to the Americans, previously

discussing the terms of surrender with the parliamentarians. These egregious cases are being hushed up, and therefore the 16th Infantry Division is being renamed the People's Grenadier Division. This is done in order to hide such cases from the higher command. However, during the investigation of the incident around Lieutenant W., on October 30, 1944, an army judge demands the arrest of the division commander, General Heckel. The wording is simple - the general did not take energetic measures in time that could have prevented such incidents. However, the outcome of the investigation was quite unexpected. The judge in his opinion stated: "There are no clear indications and evidence that Lieutenant V. and his people went over to the side of the enemy. There is a general impression that they were ambushed. Perhaps the sharp change in mood was facilitated by the news that General Heckel was presented to the Knight's Cross.

Numerous facts of desertion and voluntary surrender of employees of the 291st and 292nd battalions left traces not only in the memoirs of witnesses and participants in those events, but also in official documents. So, for example, only for the period from November 24 to November 26, 1944, 23 cases of soldiers of the 292nd battalion were considered by the military field court. In one case, it was about "undermining combat capability", in three - about desertion, and in all the remaining nineteen - about "unauthorized abandonment of the unit." But since all the cases were transferred to Brunn on the same day to the court of the 500th battalion, it can be assumed that desertion attempts were hidden behind the wording "arbitrary abandonment". This is to some extent confirmed by the report of the command of the 292nd battalion, which refers to just two such incidents.

"On October 16, 1944, grenadier Mar disappeared from the 1st company of the 292nd grenadier battalion, located 2 kilometers southeast of Kornimont, after an evening meal. and grenadier Mae. Since then, both are missing! Grenadier Mar., former officer,

who was demoted and convicted of undermining combat capability. He was transferred to the company on September 9th. During his service in the company, he constantly showed up sick and showed no interest in his official duties. He tried to avoid any assignments and assignments. The character was secretive. It can be assumed that he went over to the side of the enemy. Lately the grenadier Mar. was depressed, sad and inactive.

Grenadier Mae. He was demoted and convicted for the same crime as Mar. wt. also did not feel optimistic about the new service. In Karlsruhe, he repeatedly assured his colleagues that he would stay in the battalion for a short time. Therefore, it can be assumed

that he arbitrarily left a part. The relations of Mar. and Mae."

From another source it follows that he was called up on July 31, 1942 in the Wehrmacht May. was listed in the so-called "people's list of 11"1. He was first arrested on May 16, 1944. As an employee of the anti-aircraft crew in France, which consisted of a third of the Volksdeutsche, on March 21, 1944, he sent a letter to the "German People's List" P7, which contained the "following anti-state statements": "Today we were alerted twice, although nothing special didn't happen. I didn't see any planes in the sky at all... A few days ago, our commander forbade us to communicate in Polish. He said he would arrest anyone who spoke even one more word of Polish.

But we are not afraid of this, if he arrests all the Poles, then who will shoot then?" To intimidate other Volksdeutsche, Corporal Mae., despite the good reviews of the commander, was sentenced to 1.5 years in prison. However, after he found a like-minded person, he had the opportunity to leave the "Great German Wehrmacht" forever.

If the flight of these two grenadiers may have been successful, then Bernhard H. was less fortunate - he was captured. A few days before the end of the war, he was executed in Bremen as one of the many deserters caught.

Against the background of all these reports, the words of the French General A. Guillaume about the 291st and 292nd battalions as a worthy enemy who fought fiercely seem somewhat unjustified. Although the soldiers of both battalions were forced to attack and

counteroffensives, but their military successes were very modest. The grenadier battalions could not be compared with the 500 battalions that fought on the Eastern Front. This is expressed both in mass desertion and in cases of voluntary surrender. Although in this situation it was necessary to take into account not only the general fatigue from the war, which was inherent in both the "test subjects" and the "statutory personnel", but also the fear of the Soviet camps. So, for example, Heinz Shtachowiak, to the question: would he go over to the side of the Red Army? - unequivocally answered: "No! In no case!"

### Chapter 3 The last battles of the 500th battalions on the Eastern Front

After participating in the battles to suppress the Warsaw Uprising, the 560th battalion was transferred to the north of Warsaw in early October 1944. He took up positions between the 19th Panzer Division and the 3rd SS Panzer Division "Totenkopf", at first subordinate to the first military formation, and from October 7 he entered the disposal of the SS. The German literature provided the following information about the fate of the 560th Special Purpose Infantry Battalion. Apparently, these were excerpts from a combat log.

October 10, 1944. The attack of the enemy infantry was met by the division fully armed. However, the front line was broken. In some places, the Russian infantry follows the hurricane of artillery fire, immediately occupying the very front fortifications. On Hill 96, held by the 560th Infantry Battalion, the Russians managed to break through on the eastern flank from the direction of Rozopol.

October 11, 1944. After a relatively quiet night in the early hours of the morning at the junction of the 19th Panzer Division and the Totenkopf Division, the western part of Hill 96 was again occupied by small infantry formations. At the same time, a counterattack from the vicinity of Rozopol - Bialolek Dworska in the direction of heights 90 and 96 met enemy resistance. 10 hours 20 minutes. Enemy artillery bombarded positions between heights 96 and 101 with shells. The Red Army, with the forces of the 185th and 260th rifle divisions, managed to advance by rail to Pluda. The 2nd Panzer Regiment of the Totenkopf Division, with infantry support from the 560th Battalion, manages to build a supply line along the Pludy railway dam, along the southeastern edge of Lapigrots and east of Rozopol. The complete annihilation of the 560th Infantry Battalion in the Pludy area leads to a gap in the front line. If this becomes known to Soviet intelligence, then there is a threat that a new attack on these positions will allow the Russians to advance to the Vistula. In this situation, the 19th Panzer Division will be cut off from the units located on the eastern coast. As a result, the only reserve of the 7th Army Corps, the training assault battalion, was launched. He had to be urgently transferred by trucks from Varka to close the front breakthrough at the site of the destroyed Ridder battalion.

As you can see, in this passage we are talking about the "complete destruction" of the 560th battalion. We can say that after this the stability of the "test battalion" was exhausted. The maximum losses inflicted by superior Soviet units could not

be compensated by the urgently assembled reinforcements, which were actually not ready for active hostilities.

In this regard, it makes sense to cite an excerpt from the diary of Gottfried Hamacher, who at the beginning of November 1944 was appointed by the Free Germany National Committee to be responsible for work at the front with the 560th battalion. In those days, after the breakthrough of the front and the regrouping of German troops, the remnants of the battalion were subordinated to the 5th SS Panzer Division "Viking". It should be noted right away that in November the personnel of the battalion numbered no more than 200 people, although on October 21 it numbered 336 soldiers. So, in the diary of Gottfried Hamacher you can read: "Front Narew. November 5, 1944. At the beginning of November 1944, I received a message from the army headquarters that a German team, the so-called 560th "special purpose test battalion", which consisted of former prisoners, had appeared on the front lines. Behind the positions of the battalion was the SS unit, which, apparently, had the task of preventing a possible retreat of the battalion. It became clear to me that the soldiers of the "test battalion" believed that they were in a hopeless situation. weapons to them

it was proposed to recapture from the alleged enemy, and SS machine guns were directed at their backs.

From the National Committee, I received the task of saving all the lives of these German soldiers as far as possible. They were not supposed to die following the insane orders of Hitler and Himmler. I had to point out to them that it was possible to continue my life in another Germany. To do this, I went to the front. My goal was to explain to the soldiers of the 560th battalion that they have a way out - to desert from the Nazi Wehrmacht, and thereby escape from a hopeless situation. But I had yet to learn that it was not so easy to persuade those once sentenced to death.

The first message about the mood in the 560th battalion I received from non-commissioned officer Hubert Salmhofer, a 22-year-old hairdresser from Graz. Salmhofer was captured last night during a sortie on Wehrmacht positions. He was kidnapped from a trench and dragged on his shoulders to the Russian positions... Salmhofer told me that he was a "trial soldier" who had previously been sentenced to two years in prison for leaving his unit without permission. He spent 10 months in prison, after which he was sent to the 560th battalion. There was no question of morale in the battalion. The only feeling preserved in the soldiers was fear of the Russians. He considered it unlikely that anyone would voluntarily defect to the Soviet side. Moreover, all the approaches to the German positions were mined. Therefore, he was quite surprised that the Russians carried him through the minefield without any problems.

"Contrary to these sentiments," I told him, "we must make an effort to save these soldiers." I figured the best solution was to let him talk through the speaker to his comrades. He was to give a brief account of his stay with the Russians, that he was well treated, and at the end of his speech add that he had met with a representative of the Free Germany National Committee. Then he should have added that before the whole battalion perished, the soldiers could still escape. They must go over to the side of the Free Germany National Committee.

Salmhofer immediately responded to my proposal. After dark, we approached the most advanced, from where we began to broadcast our transmission to the positions of the 560th battalion from different sides. Our work went without a hitch, without a hitch. But we were not sure that she  
hit the target.

Front. Narew. November 6, 1944. This morning I learned from the headquarters of the regiment that early in the morning they saw how six German soldiers, letting the dog in front of them, left the German positions and headed towards the Soviet side. A dog running across the field stepped on a mine and blew up. After that, the soldiers returned to their positions.

Front. Narew. November 8, 1944. Salmhofer and I campaigned for several days through the speaker of the soldiers of the 560th battalion, but, apparently, we did not succeed. No change. After that, Salmhofer had to go back to the POW camp for registration, and I was left alone again.

Front. Narew. November 9, 1944. At night, everything suddenly changed. It was a breakthrough in our work. In the morning I received a message that two defectors from the 560th battalion had arrived at the Russians during the night. It was about the soldiers Rudolf Bekler and Josef Zobolle - both served in the 2nd company. They listened to our calls for several days and decided at the first opportunity to voluntarily surrender. This chance presented itself to them on the night of November 9, 1944, when the company commander sent them on patrol. Beckler, a 28-year-old mechanic from Berlin, was drafted into the Luftwaffe at the beginning of the war, where he served as a mechanic. Before leaving, he stole several radio tubes, which he installed at home on his radio. The story was revealed, and Bekler appeared before a military court. For such a trifle, he was sentenced to two years in prison. After six months of imprisonment, he was given "mercy" in the form of passing a test at the front. As a reason why he voluntarily surrendered, Bekler pointed to the bullying of officers, which led him to spiritual and moral degradation. He just no longer

could put up with the bestial attitude that prevailed in the battalion. When he heard our calls, it became clear to him that Russian captivity was the only way to salvation.

Zobolla was 10 years younger than him. He was a Volksdeutsche who worked in agriculture in Jablokien (Poland). He was drafted into the navy, in the French Brest. Here he was sentenced to 6 months in prison for giving the hungry French a couple of loaves of bread. He also had to be tested by the front in the 560th battalion. To my question about the reasons for switching to the Russian side, he replied: "I really am a Volksdeutsche, but I am by no means eager to sacrifice my life in the name of Hitler. The treatment I experienced in the Wehrmacht only strengthened my intention. Bekler and I agreed that it was necessary

done a long time ago."

From the statements of the defecting employees of the battalion, it became obvious that at that moment there could be no question of "the will to pass the test." However, the fear of Soviet captivity kept most of the soldiers from going over to the side of the Red Army. Many years of anti-communist and anti-Soviet propaganda played its role, which firmly settled in the heads of soldiers who feared retribution from partisans or Red Army soldiers. How widespread this fear was in the 500th battalions could be judged by the statement of one rifleman, which he made after the war. He was listed in the 560th battalion from July to September 1944. He was convicted of inflammatory speech. In 1952, he said that it was known in the battalion: "The Russians usually took revenge on the soldiers of the "test battalions", since they fought bravely in all battles." He even remembered how one officer said that the Russians even dealt with prisoners. Regardless of whether this fact of the execution of these prisoners was in reality or was it the product of an officer's wild fantasy, who relied on fabrications about Russian atrocities, it remains to be recognized that most of the "test soldiers" did not expect anything good from falling into Soviet captivity. It was under such conditions that Gottfried Hamacher had to work. His explanatory work, carried out on behalf of the "Free Germany", was supposed to avoid unnecessary sacrifices for anyone. But, given the current situation, there is nothing surprising in the fact that Soviet propaganda did not have much success in the 500th battalions. The diary entries cited above mentioned minefields. They, as well as wire fences, shooting through spaces, made it difficult to organize actions for voluntary surrender. Of course, were it not for these barriers, the number of defectors would be much larger, but this should not be considered the only and main reason for their insufficient number.

From the diaries we learn that Josef Zobolla and Rudolf Beckler, like Hubert Salmhofer, expressed their readiness to address their colleagues with propaganda appeals. Both in personal appeals and in leaflets, they admitted to voluntary surrender and pointed to the only way out - to leave the German positions. On the impact of these propaganda actions, Gottfried Hamacher's diary wrote:

"Front. Narew. November 11, 1944. At dawn, 9 German soldiers approached our positions with their hands raised, in which white handkerchiefs were clutched. Their leader was a 23-year-old soldier Wolfgang Prydel, a pianist from Berlin. He convinced his comrades that it was necessary to run across to the other side. This was prompted by the inhuman treatment in the battalion, as well as the belief that Hitler had lost the war. Therefore, he decided to take this decisive and courageous step. All these defectors read leaflets about Bekler and Zobolla, they also heard our broadcasts. They carried leaflets with them as passes. Wolfgang Pridel told me that in 1943 he tried to hide in Berlin during his vacation, but was found, after which he spent 8 months in prison. From there he was sent to the battalion.

Front. Narew. November 12, 1944. This morning several units of the Red Army attacked the German line of defense in our sector of the front. At the same time, the positions of the battalion were swept away. Among the captured prisoners were the soldiers of the battalion, who, during the Russian offensive, threw down their weapons and surrendered without a fight. Others who did not heed our calls - their number is unlikely to be established - died to the last man. They were killed in action by the advancing Russians or the SS when they tried to retreat.

This was the end of the 560th "test battalion". About a hundred slow soldiers found an inglorious end in a foreign land, and about a hundred more courageous - the beginning of a new life.

The statement that most of the battalion died in battle or was shot by the SS is not entirely true. It is known for sure that the "pieces" of the 560th battalion

On November 1944, they were removed from the front in order (as stated in official documents) to "replenish the reserves", namely the reserves of the 4th Army stationed in East Prussia. Although, in order to become a full-fledged reserve, it was necessary to fill the battalion with new soldiers. The mood of the survivors, not least due to the agitation of Gottfried Hamacher, was dire. In fact, the new appearance of the battalion occurred south of Tuschien. On December 8, 1944, there was an entry in the war diary: "Thanks to the arrival of the 560th battalion (750 employees), the combat strength on the northern sector of the front exceeds 3,800 people."

Traces of the battalion are lost in the battle for East Prussia that began on January 13-14, 1945. There is only one mention left. When the 389th Infantry Division launched a successful counterattack southeast of Tuchel in February 1945, Hill 145 was captured. The loss report stated that in the battles for Konitz-Liechnau (West Prussia), the 560th battalion lost 94 people (51 killed and 43 missing). The last soldiers from this battalion participated in March 1945 in the battles for the Kustrin fortress. Here, one of the participants in the Resistance, a member of the Red Chapel, Andre Richter, died, who was sentenced to three years in prison for "listening to foreign radio stations and failing to report on the preparation of high treason." He ended up in the battalion in November 1944, when he was rescued from the Ems camps.

In addition to the 560th battalion, during the last seven months of the war, the 550th battalion also fought on the middle part of the Eastern Front. After active use in the battles near Warsaw in October 1944, the battalion was transferred 40 kilometers south of Warsaw, where the Soviet bridgehead Warka was located on the western bank of the Vistula (in German documents, the Magnuszew bridgehead). Here is the "test part", in which at that time there were only

494 people, fell into the hands of the 45th People's Grenadier Division. However, on November 1, 1944, the command of the Center group gave the order to transfer the battalion to East Prussia, where it was placed at the disposal of the 3rd Panzer Army. At first, he was promoted to the front line on the Schlossberg-Schilfelde front. There, he was first part of the 69th Infantry Division, then the 548th People's Grenadier Division, and in early January 1945, the 69th Infantry Division. At that moment, it was relatively calm on this sector of the front, as the Red Army was preparing for a general offensive, which began on January 13, 1945.

Meanwhile, on December 6, 1944, the command of the 3rd Panzer Army informed the High Command of the Ground Forces about the use of the 550th battalion: "Since November 3, 1944, the battalion has been subordinate to the army, but so far there has not been a single opportunity to successfully use it on advanced. With a significant strength in the battalion, there is a shortage of officers and junior commanders, as well as weapons and ammunition. Immediately, the following were sent to the battalion: 5 officers, 59 junior commanders, 10 machine guns, 4 medium and 1 light mortars, 80 assault rifles and 20 panzershreks. 2281

When the commander of the 3rd Panzer Army visited the 9th Army Corps on December 21, 1944, the battalion made a very favorable impression on him. "The soldiers of the 550th Test Infantry Battalion look neat. Allegedly, after the dissolution of one of the regiments, reinforcements in the form of 300 people should arrive. That's too much for a battalion. There is a lack of authorized personnel here."

Such a redrawing did not happen, but nevertheless, the commander of the 3rd tank army still gave the order to find the required number of officers and junior commanders in the army corps subordinate to him, and send them to the 550th battalion, which at that time already numbered 1000 people. Somewhat later, the 5th and 6th companies were created in the battalion.

On January 13, 1945, the long-awaited general offensive of the Red Army began. As early as December 1, 1944, the combat log of the 3rd Panzer Army noted: "The enemy is pulling up reinforcements in the Ebenrod and Schlossberg area, which, perhaps, corresponds to his original plans. Large echelons with prisoners and the activation of aviation - all this indicates that the offensive will be carried out in this sector. The use of Soviet penal battalions, which were supposed to break through the defenses of the Wehrmacht, was considered a clear sign of a major offensive. It turned out in many respects a strange situation: the Soviet penalists had to fight against their German comrades in misfortune. They were separated by just a few kilometers. But this symbolic "meeting" never happened. Soviet penalists began to break through the front in the area above Ebenrod, which was held by the forces of the 1st Infantry Division, and the 550th Battalion held the area somewhat to the north, closer to Schlossberg. In mid-February 1945, a Soviet leaflet printed the names of various officers who had surrendered in the East Prussian pocket. Among them was the commander of the 550th battalion, Captain Alfons Kleinman. Another leaflet said: "Many of the captured officers are old, experienced front-line soldiers. Take, for example, Captain Kleinman, who has served in the Wehrmacht for 8 years and has been on the Eastern Front since the first day of the war. He was awarded many awards: the Knight's Cross, the Iron Cross 1 - class, the Iron Cross 2nd class, the medal "For the winter campaign in the East", the signs "For attack", "For close combat", "For tank battle", "For wounding".

Such officers give up because they are seasoned experts in military affairs. They understand better than anyone else that Germany has lost the war, that resistance in the East Prussian pocket will not change anything. They know they can't escape from the cauldron. You can only die and push the soldiers to a senseless death, or stop resisting, surrender and thereby save people from inevitable death.

Since the names of the "captured officers" were published in the Soviet leaflet with their approval, the question involuntarily arises - to whom this propaganda material could

save a life. Although the fighting in East Prussia continued until April 25, 1945, the new command of the battalion "missed" about 115 people. There is some possibility that most of them voluntarily surrendered. But this figure was significantly lower than in the Vitebsk pocket in June 1944. Then 165 out of 441 people "disappeared".

The first of the "test units" of the 500th Infantry Battalion from October 1944 to February 1945 was in Eastern Slovakia on the border with Hungary. During this period, he literally passed from hand to hand. For several months, the battalion managed to be part of the 100th, 101st Jaeger divisions, as well as the 254th and 75th infantry divisions. These formations fought against the Soviet units of the 2nd Ukrainian Front, which were going to liberate Slovakia. However, the battalion suffered the main losses during skirmishes with Slovak partisans. At the end of February, the battalion was redeployed to Upper Silesia on the Oder front. There, the 500th Grenadier Regiment was formed from it, which consisted of four battalions, which were respectively led by Schmidtmann, Fischer, Berger and Kaupe. Nevertheless, these battalions were not controlled by a single regimental headquarters, but by the headquarters of various divisions, between which the 500th regiment was divided. In those days, he had to hold a section of the front 25 kilometers wide between Krapitz and Kozel. In those days, a rare confusion reigned in the documents, since each of the battalions was designated as the 500th. For this reason, it is very difficult to establish the path of one or another "test formation". In order not to get confused, let's try to analyze the combat path of each of the 500th battalions.

From the beginning of February 1945, separate, largely random offensive operations were carried out on the Oder Front, which allowed the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS to hold the indicated sector of the front until March 1945. Since the timely evacuation of the German population was not undertaken, the SS managed to attract 10,000 prisoners from the Auschwitz camp, which, with 8,000 survivors, was liberated by the Red Army on January 27, 1945, to create a defense system. The deported prisoners made the infamous "death march" into Lower Silesia to the Gross-Rosen concentration camp. From there, the prisoners in the period from 5 to 10 February



1945 were taken to other camps further west. If they were lucky enough to survive the death march, then a new danger awaited them. After negotiations failed

Himmler with the Western allies, the Reichsführer SS on April 14 gave a categorical order: "Not a single prisoner should fall alive into the hands of the enemy."

It was possible to hold the front in the area of Kozel - Krapitsa until March 15, 1945, after which the Red Army launched an offensive, during which it was planned to capture the western part of Upper Silesia. But this offensive was preceded by the last major counter-offensive of the German troops, which was launched on March 8, 1945 by the forces of the 9th Army Corps. Various 500th battalions took part in this operation. During this adventure, most of the 500th battalions fell into the cauldron near Rasselwitz. Those few "test soldiers" who nevertheless escaped from the boiler ended up in Johannestal, where on March 20, 1945 they were consolidated into one battalion. Horst H., who was wounded and ended up with 20 other "test subjects" in the infirmary, wrote: "The whole battalion consisted of a wagon train and a battered company. These were the wreckage of the five battalions created in Coselle."

Stefan Herder was among those who fell into Soviet captivity in those days. As a Wehrmacht soldier, Stefan Härder deserted in the summer of 1942 after witnessing the massacres of Soviet and Polish Jews. "Nothing connected me more with the millions of brutalized German soldiers," he later wrote. After his death sentence was commuted to 15 years in prison, he was sent to the Ems Camps. From there, the "swamp soldier" was sent to Fort Torgau. Then there was a call to the 500th battalion, the stay of both Olmutze and Brunne. And only after that Herder was in Kozel. He recalled those days: "From Torgau, on the echelon, we arrived at the 500th battalion with the aim of

subsequent use at the front. Our transport was stuck in Dresden on the very day when the terrible bombardment took place there?! I accidentally got into a bomb shelter - the basement of a brewery - and was able to survive this raid. Then I became so hardened that, having escaped death, I looked at heaps of terrible corpses, but I remembered the bodies of thousands of murdered Jews and thought: yesterday they were all, from a schoolboy to an old woman, shouting: "Bombs, bombs on England!" "Today they met the fate they wished for others. And I had no sympathy.

Finally, I arrived in Kozel to take part in the battles on the Oder front. There, during an unsuccessful counterattack, I was wounded and taken prisoner by the Russians. But already in June 1945, he escaped from the prisoner of war camp, as he could no longer silently listen to the lamentations of my fellow tribesmen. None of them knew more than me about our own atrocities, which we committed against the "Bolshevik subhumans." It was risky for them to be reminded of this, since the case could end in lynching."

The assumption that such a sad personal experience determined the spiritual and mental state of the soldiers of the 500th battalions, and therefore led at the end of the war to a pronounced protest against military coercion, is fundamentally erroneous. Although, as noted above, in the last six months of the war, "signs of decay" began to clearly appear in the battalions, the sources in their entirety say that the soldiers (even under duress) continued to consider service as their military duty. Georg Ponter wrote, referring to an order from one of the officers of the 334th Infantry Division: "Reserve Captain Fogh reports a night attack by the 500th battalion on Soviet positions in Krapitsa, approximately 25 kilometers south of Oppeln. As a result, the bridgehead up to the bridge along the Oder again passed into our hands. Based on the same source, it can be noted that Krapitz "was the most restless sector on the front, which was held by the 334th Infantry Division." But until the end of March 1945, this area was held by the 500th battalion.

Paul W. reported on another successful operation on the Krapitz-Kozel section: "In February 1945, I was assigned to intelligence. We received orders to destroy three anti-tank guns behind the Russian front line. During the sortie, I was shot in the thigh, and I was also wounded by a fragment of a fan in the head. After the successful destruction of Soviet guns, I was promoted to the rank

Chief Corporal, was awarded the Iron Cross First Class and the bronze badge "For Wound". Positive feedback - from the point of view of the Wehrmacht - was given by officer Horst H. from the second battalion (Fischer), in his tenure demoted for "statements that undermine combat capability." He wrote: "We received good and absolutely new uniforms and ammunition, but we were not given any weapons ... The echelon went on for 13 days. Having passed through Bratislava, we arrived at the bridgehead in Kozel (Neukirch - Upper Silesia). Already at the Neukirch station we came under fire. Then we rushed to the office of Dorosselyilag, where we got hold of hand fans, sapper shovels, and every third got a rifle and ammunition. On the night of the 6th to the 7th, we took up positions ... Someone asked about the former ranks. When no one answered, I said that I was a platoon leader. We continued to lie in positions for three days. During the day it was impossible to move, and at night the Russians tried to attack. Then twice they tried to drive us out of position during the day, but all their attacks were repulsed. The food supply was tolerable.

The number of losses is not very high. Our group did a lot in those days. Discipline and camaraderie were up to the mark."

We read further: "We have never built fortifications on this sector of the front. As soon as the Soviet pressure weakened, we were immediately transferred to another place. One march will forever remain in my memory. The people were dead tired. As soon as we made a halt, everyone scattered to the surrounding houses. When it was necessary to continue the journey, I had to run around the neighborhood and collect them like scattered sheep. But relatively few people took advantage of this opportunity to escape. The one who is not

wanted to fight, deserted a long time ago. Inexperienced soldiers were killed or wounded, so only experienced warriors remained in the battalion, who managed to get through the "swamp camps" and penal battalions. 31

As you can see, on the Eastern Front, the "test soldiers" showed a great willingness to fight. There were also fewer deserters here than on the Western Front. Such a significant difference can be explained by the fact that German soldiers were more likely to survive in captivity by the Allies. According to the investigative service of the German Red Cross, in October 1944, 52 people went missing in the 291st and 292nd grenadier battalions. As of April 1945, this figure was about 900 people.

But what reasons forced the soldiers to fight, who, having gone through the FGA and the camps, perfectly understood that the war had long been lost? Here various circumstances were mixed together, so in most cases it would be better to consider the example of a specific soldier. First, it is necessary to point to the judicial terror, which had the most striking manifestation in this sector of the front. The fact is that this was directly related to the appointment of the commander of Army Group Center, General Ferdinand Schörner. There was a bad rumor about him in the army. The military behind his back called him none other than Ferdinand the Bloody. There was a sad saying in the units: "He who lost his unit, with one foot already stood at the heap of sand." Let me explain. Heaps of sand were used as bullet traps during executions at the front. How strict this control was, Fernand Conan found out after spending only a few days in one of the 500th battalions. This resident of Luxembourg was drafted into the Wehrmacht in October 1942, after the occupation of his country by Germany. In the autumn of 1943, he used his first vacation to escape from the Eastern Front. He intended to go over to the Belgian partisans. However, his plans were not destined to come true. He visited both the Ems camps and the Torgau fort. Only at the end of 1944 did he end up in the 500th battalion. One interesting fact about the life of the "bog camps" and prisons of the Wehrmacht. Upon arrival at one of the Ems camps, he weighed 68 kilograms. During the weigh-in at Fort Torgau, the scales showed 44 kilograms. But back to the front. In February 1945, Konan found himself in the vicinity of Krapitz. He recalled: "Every day I stood at the post for 20 hours. I undermined my health in the camps. By the way, the food supply here was just as disgusting as it was there. I didn't actually rest. My nervous system was so exhausted that I was delirious at night while sleeping. I don't know what I said there when my mind was clouded, but the fanatical squad leader, who slept in the same dugout as me, told the company commander about it. It was alleged that I intended to run away and

spoke very disrespectfully of the Wehrmacht. In fact, at the first opportunity, I would go over to the side of the Russians. I was roused from sleep and brought to the lieutenant colonel, who called me a coward and a pest. Considering my behavior and my criminal record, I should have been shot. However, I gained strength and answered that I was delirious, but in fact without even thinking about these actions. Since this explanation turned out to be convincing, Fernando Conan was spared his life - he was only transferred to another company.

Nevertheless, the will of many 500s was paralyzed not only by the terror of the courts-martial that threatened the present and future, but also by the terror of the past, when they had to experience the horrors of being in prisons and camps. Reinhard Schulze went over to the Soviet side, as he was able to be convinced of the futility of the war. Looking back to 1945, he admitted that the memories of his time in prison themselves drove away any thoughts of desertion: "When the Ems Esterwegen camp appeared before my eyes, I told myself that I would never desert again. I wanted to fast forward this terrible, inferior and helpless existence, which bore little resemblance to human existence. If you were familiar with the hell of swamp camps, then any trouble would seem like nothing. I would gladly be on the front lines rather than continue to be in Esterwegen. This camp was the most terrible place that could exist on earth. With us

treated worse than animals. When I became a soldier again, life seemed like paradise to me.

From this statement it becomes clear how the imprisonment in the swamps affected the victims of Nazi army justice. Some of the "marsh soldiers" hated the Wehrmacht and everything National Socialist so much after the camps that there could be no question of the declared "education". But on the other hand, terrible memories fettered the will to resist, and therefore the soldier seemed in many ways impeccable. At the same time, the important role was played by the fact that any attempt to leave the Wehrmacht could be the last. The 500s encountered this in numerous examples of their fellow soldiers. For many, an attempt to save their lives ended in execution. In fact, no one had previously taken into account that after the liberation from the "swamp camps" the soldiers could undergo a psychological change. In the camp they were treated worse than animals, but in the battalion he again became a man. How deeply such changes traumatized can be learned from the words of the former "swamp soldier" Wolfgang Dietrich. He described his feelings when he learned about his "pardon" and enrollment in the summer of 1944 in the "test battalion": "It felt like I was born again, that I was given a new life."

Similar descriptions can be found in Horst Zytlov, who was sentenced to five years in the camps for desertion and "undermining combat capability". In November 1944, he moved from the swamps to Brunn: "We arrived from a concentration camp. Many of us have said goodbye to life. In Brunn, we enjoyed every little thing. During the leave we went to a cafe. Our treatment was normal, at least not better than in Greater Germany. It wasn't a grueling drill." This person found the change in his life situation positive. It was a kind of sedative anesthesia, which dulled the soldiers' sense of self-preservation. The general feeling of euphoria made it difficult to understand that the Wehrmacht brought suffering to the peoples of Europe. The soldier was in many ways simply unable to share this

responsibility.

In this connection, interesting observations can be made from the field of social psychology. To the question: how could it happen that the number of deserters compared to the general situation in the Wehrmacht was quite small? Reinhard Schulze replied: "In this case, one must take into account the mentality of front-line soldiers: if I don't shoot, then they will shoot at me. Often non-commissioned officers walked behind our backs with a pistol in their hands. Do you think someone was burning with the desire to fight? But the test battalion was a test battalion for that. What was to be done? We didn't have an alternative. And besides, we thought we were defending the German people. We thought it was a noble task. We said to ourselves: we are protecting the Germans so that they do not fall into the hands of the Russians.

The passage at the end of this memoir indicates that even soldiers who once deserted from the Wehrmacht or were convicted of "undermining combat capability" were not, for the most part, immune from Nazi propaganda. Only a few could resist it internally. Propaganda hammered into the heads of the 500s that it was their duty to defend the homeland. At the same time, the pictures of retribution, which the Red Army was doing in Upper Silesia and the Sudetenland, were savored. Horst H. reported this: "There were several 16-year-old boys in the battalion who served as messengers. These children witnessed the occupation of their city by the Russians. They had to endure everything that was usually associated with this: robberies, violence, fires, executions. Some of them saw their loved ones die. They had managed to sneak into the German lines and now they were burning with the desire to take revenge on the Russians. Even this soldier, who knew in general terms about the horrors of the German occupation, about the thousands of destroyed Soviet villages and cities, about the mass executions in Babi Yar, about the death camps, could not correlate cause and effect. In the end, he still perceived only the suffering of the German civilian population. After all, it's debatable that the stories regaled in the 500s were true. So,

for example, Reinhard Schulze mentioned that information about Russian atrocities in Kozel began to appear even before the 500th battalion left this sector of the front.

Meanwhile, we have not mentioned all the factors that contributed to the fact that many 500s tried to fulfill their military duty. Along with the banal inability to make independent decisions, a significant role was played by faith in passing the notorious "test". Horst H. described the situation at the end of the war as follows: "If during the fighting a unit lost its office along with the documents of the soldiers being tested, then they lost their last hope of improving their situation. If an officer died, then the soldiers lost a witness who could confirm that they really passed the "test". Only the battalion was a guarantee that there was still a chance to return from Bohemia to Germany.

In addition, some of the members of the Free Germany National Committee who operated on that sector of the front established that very many 500s were imbued with faith in the Führer's miracle weapon. The minutes of the working meeting, which took place on March 7, 1945, said: "Kammlein brought up for discussion the statement of two prisoners from the 500th penal battalion: "We ourselves would never voluntarily surrender. Germany definitely has a secret weapon!"

It was a typical technique that forced ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers to hold out to the last. A general overview of these negative phenomena could be read in the letter of the National Committee "Free Germany", which was sent on January 9, 1944 to the headquarters of the 4th Ukrainian Front. The paper, which was devoted to the organization of propaganda, said:

"From experience, the following prejudices and doubts have been established that must be dealt with. The soldier learned that the war would not last long. If you surrender, it means postponing your return home.

General apathy...

Fear of being shot in captivity.

Hope for a clash of allies. Hope for the genius of Hitler (wonder weapon, secret weapon) ... Very strong fear of punishment for crimes committed and destruction in the occupied territory. The German people burned all their bridges behind them. Fear of the Gestapo.

As you can see, the 500s were forced to remain under the banner of the Wehrmacht for multiple reasons: their own apathy, illusory dreams, horrors painted by Nazi propaganda, fear of Russian captivity, fear of military field courts and SS barrage detachments. Probably, the protest potential in the 500th battalions was much higher than in other parts of the Wehrmacht. However, there was clearly a lack of politically literate soldiers who could

organize underground work that could pour out latent discontent and implicit opposition into open resistance. Those forces that could organize this either disappeared a long time ago in concentration camps, or were isolated in the 999th battalions.

As mentioned earlier, in the spring of 1945, the military leadership of the Reich sent "politically unreliable" 999s to the 500th battalions. In particular, this concerned Olmütz. However, in the last month of the war, the situation on the fronts turned out to be so disastrous for the Wehrmacht that it was decided to use all forces. At the beginning of April 1945, trains were sent to Brunn and Olmütz, which were supposed to take out the 500th battalions, which consisted mostly of 999th battalions, from the border area between Silesia and Slovakia. On the 20th of April, these "march companies", as well as the remainder of the 500th regiment - Fisher's battalion, were supposed to hold a space limited

Ziegenhals, Johannestal, Tsikmantel. A huge number of 999s were taken away on trains, which (as mentioned above) was the reason for the weakening of the underground organization. In fact, the planned armed uprising was thwarted. If we talk about the military situation of the Fischer battalion, then it was described in his memoirs by Horst H.: "We took up a position at the foot of the so-called Bishop's Hill. Our situation was excellent, but the Russians were disgusting. The Russians were located in a swampy lowland and the construction of any fortifications was difficult. In addition, we had artillery, which had sufficient ammunition to carry out barrage fire. In addition, the Russian infantry units were useless. They were constantly changing. After each shift at the front, an offensive followed again. After the Russians realized that it was difficult for them to move forward, there was a lull for several days. From time to time we were called upon to voluntarily surrender. We were promised a lot of good things, but when no one went over to their side, we were bombarded with heavy mortar fire."

In the indicated area, Fischer's 500th battalion was part of the 1st Ski Jaeger Division. The calm situation here lasted until May 7, 1945. The day before, Grand Admiral Dönitz had succeeded Hitler as Reich President of Germany and Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht. On that day, he wrote in his diary: "Report about the uprising in Prague. From now on, units on the Eastern Front are ordered to save as many German soldiers as possible and move to the West." This order also reached the 1st Ski Jaeger Division, which immediately began to retreat in the direction of Freivaldau and Landskrona. How the retreat in Fischer's battalion took place is described in the memoirs of Horst H.: "On May 6, we learned that the war was lost on the Eastern Front, and on the night of May 7 to 8, we systematically began to retreat in the direction of Dürr and Kunzedorf". But some time before that, a dramatic incident took place.

"Shortly before the retreat, panic broke out in one of the platoons. We were told that the company was supposed to cover the division's withdrawal, and therefore, it was necessary to sacrifice the platoon, which occupied the central positions. At that time, the platoons had already left the left and right flanks. One of the new section commanders with his men retreated at night. People who had already lived in wet trenches for almost half a month went into the village abandoned by the inhabitants in order to wash, eat and sleep. Here they were captured. All of them were brought before the court-martial. They were sentenced to hang. The execution was to be carried out before the general formation of the battalion. I saw tears in the eyes of the battalion commander." This execution was absolutely senseless.

Horst H., a former officer demoted for his political views, was somehow able to find out about the mood in other platoons of the 500th battalion in some incredible way. "Since the convicts threatened the general retreat, many in the battalion considered this sentence justified. The battalion commander allowed himself one liberties - he shot the convicts, and then hung their bodies on the side of the road. In the evening, their corpses were buried by the Volkssturm detachment.

In addition, it must be added that this was by no means the only mass execution. These dramatic events were directly related to the withdrawal from Olmutz of a group of "political" 999s. One of them said that in May 1945 underground groups began to arise again, which were supposed to unite and voluntarily go over to the side of the Red Army. As for specific details, Otto Radam wrote in his memoirs: "On April 20, our unit ended up in Silesia near Ziegenhals. We didn't have rifles because we were forced to dig trenches at night. Only at the end of April every second of us was given a rifle. With a few friends, we took up something like reserve positions. On May 2, the sergeant-major told us that the Fuhrer and his entourage had died in Berlin. Early on the morning of May 4, I and other 999s were gathered in front of our company's command post. The battalion commander Captain Fisher was already there. In our presence, nineteen of our comrades

sentenced to death. Several soldiers armed with machine guns drove them into the forest. Four of them were then hanged from trees. The author speaks of two groups of executed. Four shot and then hanged, and 15 other soldiers. In the diary of Oscar Meyer there is an entry: "May 4th. 15 people were shot for leaving their positions without permission."

In those days, many of the 500th Battalion thought about the senselessness of bloodshed. Fernand Conan, already familiar to us, took advantage of the turmoil to carry out a long-developed escape plan: "From the behavior of our commanders and the nervousness that literally hovered in the air, I realized that something had happened. I made my decision a long time ago. At the first opportunity, I decided to run away. At night, I stood guard at the spruce thicket in which the partisans lived. On the night of May 4-5, 1945, I threw away my rifle and rushed into the spruce forest. Someone shot at me from behind, perhaps it was one of my fanatical escorts. I ran through the forest to the very first village, where I hid in a hay barn. It was the Sudeten village of Langenbrücke. I tried to bandage the wound with my handkerchief. The bullet slightly grazed the left shin. I went two days without food or drink. And then the Russian shaft fell on the German positions. It was too early to cross over to the other side. Behind the Russians, Czech partisans entered the village. Only then did I dare to leave my hiding place."

The thesis we put forward that the unrest in Fischer's battalion was caused by seconded 999s is confirmed by the actions taken by the battalion commander. In his letter to the Czech communists, O. Meyer wrote that "12 comrades from the battalion were suddenly disarmed and handed over to the field gendarmerie." His diary read: "May 6th. 12 "political" out of the 999 were suddenly disarmed. Transferred to the gendarmerie of the 1st Ski Jaeger Division. May 7th The field gendarmes took them to the copse near Freivaldau.

Something similar was described by Otto Radam. But it is still not clear whether it was the same case or still different. "the 6th of May. Me and 12 other buddies sentenced to death. We have been handed over to the gendarmerie for execution. I am obliged to the company commander of the gendarmes that he did not kill us on the same day. Apparently, he deliberately delayed this process. He knew the war was lost. But since we were communists, the Nazi executioners wanted to take revenge on us. But at night a hasty retreat began. Four corporals and chief corporals were assigned to us, who were armed with submachine guns. But they themselves were interested in returning home to their families. In the end, we managed to escape when the guards were distracted. While Otto Radam, along with the Berliner Werner Müller Grimm, were in Soviet captivity, Oskar Meyer, along with two communists (Hans Lehnert and Heinrich Krone), took refuge in a safe place. Nothing about the fate of other anti-fascists not known.

Even if some details of the last days of the existence of the Fischer battalion were hidden from us, we can still come to the conclusion that the 999th destabilized (as far as they could) the situation in it. However, even on the last day of the war, the battalion continued to "function". Khost H. wrote: "Early in the morning of May 8, 1945, our artillery fired the last shells. The Russians apparently thought that we would launch a sortie, and therefore withdrew from their positions. This allowed us to move to new positions. As soon as we occupied them, then arrived

commander and said that by Tuesday we were supposed to be in Königsgratz beyond the Elbe. Deadly tired people had to overcome about 100 kilometers! We didn't understand what was happening. They said that the Russians had bypassed us, and we were in danger of being surrounded. We threw out everything that could interfere with our forced march. They left only personal weapons and a small ammunition and a couple of grenades. We imagined that there was an exit from the boiler, at which an officer stood and showed the way home!

However, the column was attacked by Czech partisans, and it was scattered throughout the surroundings. Soldiers made their way to Germany one by one or in small groups.

Some of the surviving 500s succeeded. But most were captured by the partisans or the Red Army.

#### Chapter 4 Planned Death in the Courland Cauldron

As mentioned earlier, on November 30, 1944, under the Army Group North, the 491st Special Purpose Infantry Battalion was formed from the prisoners and convicts at the disposal. Somewhat later, Army Group North was renamed Army Group Courland. At the time of its renaming, that is, by January 25, 1945, it was cut off from all land routes. Its supply could be carried out only through the ports of Liepaja (Libau) and Ventspils (Windau). By the beginning of 1945, the front line was approximately 250 kilometers. It passed from the Gulf of Riga to Tukums (Tukkum), through Saldus (Frauenburg), Skronuda (Schruden), Prikule (Preekuln), up to the coast of the Baltic Sea, 30 kilometers from Libau. Little is known about the use of the 491st Infantry Battalion on the Courland Front. After its creation, the 491st battalion was sent to the vicinity of Pampali, where it was subordinated to the command of the 132nd Infantry Division. By January 1945, he was transferred to the 225th Infantry Division, on the position of which the most powerful offensive of the Red Army was expected. This offensive began on January 24, 1945. In the Wehrmacht, it was dubbed the "Fourth Battle for Courland". On January 26, 1945, the command of the 2nd Army Corps reported on the course of the battles: "On the left flank of the 11th Infantry Division and the 225th Infantry Division, 23 attacks were repelled, which were undertaken by the forces of one regiment. On the fourth day of the 4th battle for Courland, the enemy failed to achieve any success. But still, on the night of January 27-28, 1945, the Red Army broke through the front in the sector, which was just held by the 491st battalion. During this operation, the battalion suffered losses in the amount of 300 people.

If this infantry battalion was still regarded as a kind of "500th test unit", and therefore, rushed into the thick of battle, then gradually the 1st Army Corps took its place. The very command of the corps received an order that sounded completely different. On February 5, 1945, the corps command was instructed to "withdraw a special-purpose battalion from the right flank of the corps in order to prevent it from falling into the spearhead of the Soviet attack." Surely the combat value of the battalion was so low that the Germans did not want to risk this sector of the front - a breakthrough on it meant the collapse of the entire German group in Courland. Something similar happened on February 14, 1945: "Do not recognize the special-purpose battalion as a shock unit and take it to the reserve."

As you can see, in the last days of the war, the hastily created 491st battalion (however, like the 291st and 292nd grenadier battalions) could not achieve the results that fell on the combat biography of the 500th battalions themselves. The command was forced to admit that the experiment was unsuccessful. Attempts to bring order to military discipline through the issuance of mass death sentences could hardly change anything. First of all, this had to do with the 491st battalion.

But along with the 491st battalion, the "old" 500th battalions continued to fight in the Army Group "Kurland". In this situation, these were the 540th and 561st infantry battalions. Both formations were still in the midst of the attacks that the 18th Army was trying to repulse. This indicates that the 500s, in spite of everything, retained their combat effectiveness and were considered by the army command as quite reliable units. The specified inferno was going on in the area

Preekuln (35 km southeast of Libau), where the Red Army intended to deliver a powerful blow along the Preekuln-Libau railway line, thus occupying the most important strategic port. The second focus of the battle was at Pampali (75 km southeast of Liebau and 25 km southwest of Frauenburg), where the Soviet attack was supposed to cut the railway, thereby blocking the 16th and 18th German armies.

After 15 people remained from the 561st battalion in September 1944, it was re-supplied and placed under the command of Major Yonishkaite. He took the first fight in the new line-up from Pampali. The battles in November 1944 were described in the documents of the investigative service of the German Red Cross: "Soviet troops are continuously attacking in the vicinity of Frauenburg, where the border between the 16th and 18th armies passes. The enemy repeatedly tried to split the military group and reach Libau. The 561st Grenadier Battalion has been in the Pampali area since last week, 25 kilometers southwest of Frauenburg. After a break between battles due to bad weather, the enemy continued to strike in this direction on November 17. With the support of tank and flying units, the infantry is trying to cut the route and the railway from Frauenburg to Liebau from the south. In the vicinity of Pampali, it came to bloody battles, during which the defenders were forced to retreat north 5 kilometers from Lotka in the direction of Stedeni. According to those who returned to the rear, on November 20, the battalion battle group launched an offensive near Brinini, which, despite the success of the Soviet offensive, continued to defend. The battle group was forced to move to all-round defense and, when enemy pressure intensified after high losses, left the occupied territory. On November 24, in small groups, the battalion moved to its previous positions. After this battle, the 561st Grenadier Battalion lost many soldiers.

After prolonged rains temporarily interrupted the fighting, on December 21, 1944, another offensive of superior Soviet forces was launched ("Third Battle for Courland"). It is also mentioned in the documents of the search service: "After fierce fighting, the soldiers of the 561st Grenadier Battalion were forced to leave Pampali and retreat north to Stedeni, Liguta and Perkeni. These places changed hands several times. And only by the night of December 22 did the enemy take possession of them. Having lost communication, the remnants of the battalion continued their retreat to the north. Only a few managed to escape."

After these battles, associated with huge losses, the battalions were not replenished for a long time. Only on January 8, 1945, fresh forces in the amount of 493 people were sent to the 540th and 561st battalions. At that time, both battalions were in the Preekuln area. They were sent to the reserve and for some time remained in relative calm. However, on January 23, 1945, the 561st battalion was again sent to the front line. In the evening of the same day, General Tomashki, specially sent from the 10th Army Corps, reported: "The 561st battalion will settle everything. Akseli has a good promotion." And here is a message dated January 26, 1945: "The battalion is under heavy attack from the south. It was possible to prevent a breakthrough of the front near Tolya and east of Saulishi. The further course of the fighting is described by the German Red Cross: "The counterattack undertaken here on January 27 and 28 by the forces of the 561st Grenadier Battalion was unsuccessful. After heavy fighting, the nearby villages of Raini, Tolki and Kaleti had to be conceded. The remnants of the strike group reunited partly, after which they began to retreat to their original positions. Further, heavy losses were reported.

After this failed operation, the 561st battalion was once again bled dry. He had to be withdrawn from the front line. When the "Fifth Battle for Courland" began in February 1945 (February 20 - March 11, 1945), it began to be used as a reserve for the 540th battalion, which ended up at Preekuln. The use of this battalion, commanded by Guddak, who was included in the "Honorary List of the German Army" at the end of 1944, was again reported by the German Red Cross: "Between February 15 and 19, this unit was prepared for combat operations. On February 20, she had to face a powerful Soviet offensive, which began with a heavy artillery bombardment of Preekuln, as well as the railway leading to Libau. Soon after this, a powerful infantry-tank strike followed, while enemy aircraft bombarded the German fortifications on the front line with hundreds of bombs. 540th Grenadier Battalion,



which provided cover for the railway in different sectors of the front, immediately entered into a fierce struggle. He immediately

suffered huge losses. On February 22, the enemy occupied Preekuln. The retreating German units, among which were companies of the 540th battalion, took the fight the next day, 7 kilometers to the west near the village of Jauseni near the railway line. Almost all of them died. The 540th battalion suffered the biggest losses. Before the 540th battalion was surrounded, he managed to take part in the destruction of the 8th Guards Division of the Red Army, which was allowed in March 1945.

Although not very many documents have been preserved about the 540th and 561st battalions that cover their military operations from November 1944 to the spring of 1945, even this meager information is enough to draw the following conclusions. Firstly, one of the battalion commanders was included in the "Honorary List of the German Army". Secondly, the battalions were used in the most dangerous sectors of the front. Thirdly, none of the documents contain negative comments about the battalions. Everything allows us to say that they were not inferior to the regular units of the Wehrmacht either in terms of combat capability or reliability. And this at a time when the 5th Lithuanian battalion was disarmed, as "there were suspicions that the Lithuanians intended to desert to Sweden." They continued the war as "test soldiers" of the 563rd People's Grenadier Division. However, in this situation, it would be hasty to draw parallels with 500 batt

In order to somehow compensate for the high losses in the 491st, 540th and 561st battalions, in April 1945, transport was sent to the Courland pocket from Brunn and Olmütz. Although several units were taken out of the boiler, the complete liberation of Courland was not included in the plans of the German military leadership. The Courland cauldron was doomed from the very beginning. From a military point of view, it was a pointless undertaking. Thousands of soldiers became hostages of the political games of the Nazi bosses. The top of the Reich, in the course of their negotiations with the Western allies, hoped to use Courland as a bastion for spreading anti-Soviet sentiment throughout Eastern Europe. On April 7, 1945, transport by sea took 350 people from the battalions, which were based in Brunn in the "Adolf Hitler barracks", to Courland. This transport was driven by Heinrich F., convicted of "undermining combat capability", in the past a "swamp soldier" and a prisoner of Fort Torgau. He reported on the fate of this ship: "The ship was a powerful structure. He bore the name "Captain Gvir". On April 13, 1945, at about 7 p.m., he anchored off the island of Rügen. We stayed there on April 14th. On Sunday morning, April 15, we headed for Libau. We were accompanied by a patrol boat and a minesweeper. The weather was great. The Baltic Sea was as smooth as a mirror. The passengers were mostly Latvian SS men, warriors and we, "test soldiers". I think there were only 1200 people. Suddenly, the ship's siren sounded. Air Alert! Eight enemy fighters appeared. Between them and the anti-aircraft gunners a frantic firefight ensued. Bombs exploded all around. Our ship received a hole in the side. There was a terrible crack. There is chaos all around. Around some boxes, boards, beds. We were hit three times. Bombs twice. Once with a torpedo. My leg got stuck and I was on the brink of death. Fire! Chad! Someone ran past me, someone lay dead next to me. With the last of my strength, I tried to free my leg, stuck between the boards. Then I prayed: Virgin Mary, help me! Here I felt that the boards were weakened. I managed to free myself. At the same moment, I flew up to the upper deck, grabbed my life jacket and jumped into the water. I immediately tried to swim away from the sinking ship. 10 minutes later I reached the patrol boat. The water was so cold that I could hardly hold on to the rope thrown to me. Looking back, I saw a picture that I usually saw only in military film magazines. The ship was sinking, one half of it rose above the water, the other was already under it. On the stern protruding above the water, I saw people who screamed and rushed from side to side. Some of them jumped into the water, some waited for the ship to go under the water. But both of those funnels were pulled to the depths.

During the raid, Soviet aviation destroyed 774 people. Not even half of those who traveled by ship reached Courland. For this reason, a new transport was sent from Olmütz. The new replenishment was loaded onto the ship and arrived in Libau on April 17, 1945. As you might guess, on this ship was a "cocktail" of the actual 500s and many 999s. Paul Behring, once a political prisoner, later 999th, recalled in 1946: "During

On Easter week 1945, about 200 people were suddenly chosen from those present. The next day we learned that we were to be sent to Courland. During the journey, we found out that out of 200 people, approximately 80 were 500s, and 120 were 999s. On April 21, 1945, we arrived in Liebau and there everyone became 500."

Actually, the 500s were sent to the 540th and 561st battalions. The command did not dare to repeat the experience with the creation of "mixed companies". For this reason, most of the 999s were sent to the 491st battalion, which did not prove itself from the "best side". Paul Behring reported on their subsequent fate: "On the same day we were sent to the nearby southern sector of the front. We were considered unreliable soldiers there. We were endlessly sorted until there were 28 people left. All the rest were also divided into companies and sent to the front line. Two of them immediately went over to the side of the Red Army... When we looked around, we found that they were all communists or social democrats who had gone through concentration camps. Among us was even a former member of the Reichstag, Willy Agats. We all ended up in a penal company. If I'm not mistaken, then we were assigned to the 420th battalion. We kept to ourselves. Can't say we were treated badly. Most likely, the attitude could be called wary. But this was not a true relationship. We felt it, but we could not understand what was in store for us. We received rifles without ammunition and began to be involved in various labor assignments. One day we marched all day towards the front line, where we began to fell trees and cut them up. It was hard work, but we persevered."

As the documents show, the sorting of "political" 999s took place after interrogation, which was carried out by an officer of the 491st battalion. On May 8, 1945, on the day of the unconditional surrender of the Nazi Wehrmacht, three 999s were selected, including Wilhelm Agats. They were supposed to be liquidated at the last moment without any trial or investigation. As follows from the testimony of the commander of the 5th company of the 491st battalion, Lieutenant Yubler, he was able to first detain for several hours, and then completely prevent the "liquidation". He stated in Soviet captivity that he "considered the planned execution a crime in which he did not want to take part."

The end of this story is best told through the lips of Paul Behring: "Meanwhile, May 8, 1945, the day of the surrender of Germany, was approaching. But we learned about this a little later. Here the war seems to have been continuous. On this May day, we saw several officers of the Nazi Wehrmacht. They had no weapons, but steel helmets and white armbands. They walked towards the front. What's happened? We received a response very quickly. Our commanders said goodbye to us. They extended their hands to us. Some suddenly began to call us "comrades." We heard this word for the first time since we, "unworthy of service", were called to the Wehrmacht. It was clear that the rats were about to flee the ship. We 999 - 25 Communists - armed ourselves and began to take away weapons from all the officers who came across to meet us. Our next goal was the headquarters of the company, in which we intended to learn about the fate of our comrades Willy Agats and Walter Zarov. Luckily we found them alive. They were to be shot next to the road that led to the quarry. The non-commissioned officer was supposed to act as an executioner and act without a military court verdict. Nevertheless, it seemed to one of the officers that in the current situation it would be more expedient to postpone the execution. Now we have become completely independent. The rest of the soldiers asked to go along with us, but we instructed them to distribute the products that were found at the headquarters."

In the afternoon, the first groups of Red Army soldiers began to penetrate into our region. However, the Soviet soldiers did not have time to take care of us. They hurried to Liepaja, from where the German officers and the headquarters of the encircled army group tried to escape on pre-prepared ships. Meanwhile, we gathered all the soldiers at the former front line and began to agitate them. Willi Agats told them about the end of the war and that they would start a new life. It was the first legal anti-fascist performance since 1933. There was a sudden break. The reason for this was the approaching Soviet cavalry squadron. Approximately 10 horsemen rode up to us. They did not dismount, but only counted us. We greeted our liberators with loud, jubilant cries of "Hurrah!" Then we began to sing the "Internationale". Russian horsemen

began to sing along to us. Then they saluted and headed back. They even left us weapons. We lined up in order and with proletarian songs went to Soviet captivity.

## Conclusion

In the summer of 2007, the United States Department of Defense expressed concern that criminal elements were increasingly infiltrating the ranks of the armed forces, who, after the end of their service, used the acquired skills for anything other than legitimate purposes. All this suggests that there is a clear shortage of potential military personnel in the United States. For this reason, American soldiers have to turn a blind eye to the past of the soldiers. Something similar was and is used in the French Foreign Legion. But in this situation we are talking about a special formation, which is used in exceptional cases. Something similar can be said about the "penal battalions of the Wehrmacht" that have sunk into oblivion. Having begun their existence exclusively with "educational" purposes, they turned into a kind of shock units, with which they tried to close the gaps that appeared at the front. However, penal battalions did not save the Third Reich from military defeat. It would be equally erroneous to assume that the Great Patriotic War was won solely by the forces of the Soviet "penal battalions". Both sides at a critical moment tried to get rid of the "unnecessary" elements of society, sending them into the war hell. The main difference was that the Soviet leadership did not create a complex system of penal units, limiting themselves to penal battalions and companies. In the Wehrmacht, with the pedantry inherent in the Germans, this system crystallized for a long time, until (according to the Nazi leadership) an optimal solution was found. This book by no means exhausts the topics covered in its title. The 500th SS parachute battalion and the Dirlwanger brigade were actually left behind. However, I believe that the author still managed to shed light on the more than confusing issue of the Wehrmacht's penal battalions.

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Notes 1 WWI 2

Traditionally, the translation of this wording sounds like "unfit for military service." However, it is not entirely accurate and does not fully convey all aspects (including ideological ones) that are associated with its use.

Z "Service for the study of suitability". — A.V.

4 Jehovah's Witnesses. — A.V.

5 Wehrmacht prison. — A.V.

6 FGA. — A.V.

7 Nazi version of the "enemy of the people". — A.V.

8

First of all, anti-fascist parties are meant: communist, social democratic, etc.

9 NSDAP. — A.V.

10 test part 500. - A.V.

eleven

Napola - National-Political Educational Institutions - elite educational institutions of the Third Reich, where the emphasis was on practical training for military and party service.

12 to Germany. — A.V. 13 secrets. — A.V. 14th commander of the 500th battalion. — A.V. 15th commander of the 550th battalion. — A.V. 16th company of the 550th battalion. — A.V. 17 German name for Biala Podlaska. — A.V. 18 560th battalion. — A.V. 19 100th Chasseur. — A.V. 20 Germans. — A.V. 21 on the side of the USSR. — A.V. On the 22nd at the moment, Stefan E. was able to move to Austria. — A.V. 23 it was possible to form a separate battalion. — A.V. 24 Until September 20, 1939, Max Felsch was already a prisoner in the Buchenwald camp. — A.V. 25

Franciers - "free shooters", the so-called French partisans who made sorties against the Prussians during the Franco-Prussian war. During the Second World War - the general name for the local population, which provided armed resistance.

Document 26 was dated October 26, 1944. — A.V. 27

The German People's List was an organization that served as an instrument for registering Germans and Volksdeutsche in Western Poland. Later, this practice was also applied to other

occupied territories.

28

Panzerschreck (from German "tank horror") - a type of grenade launcher, which differed from the panzerfaust in the possibility of multiple use.

29

February 12-14, 1945. — A.V. thirty

apparently, field prison units were meant - A.V. 31

wrong number, 491st battalion. — A.V.